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FEATURING

BUFFALO BILLY'S REWARD

An Indian Scout Novelet

By SCOTT CARLETON

GRANT HARRIS

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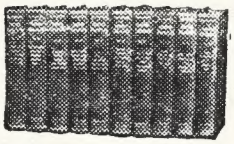

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By SCOTT CARLETON

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U.S. MAIL
TRAINING AT HOME FOR RADIO IS PRACTICAL AND I'M GETTING ALONG FAST
SOON I CAN START FIXING RADIOS
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The HOME CORRAL

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OLD DOC TRAIL

HOWDY, hombres and hombresses! Me, I'm back from a long looksee in western Canada. Yessir, and I'm plum amazed at their wild West. A heap o' you Home Corralers live up Canada way. But plenty amongst us never had the chance to visit up yonder with our sidekicks, the Canucks and Canuckesses.

So here goes. I crave to tell you they're mighty friendly and likeable folks. They're what our Mexican neighbors would call *simpatico*, meanin' regular folks.

Unexplored Regions

Time was, right recent too, when upper British Columbia was clean beyond reach, except along the seacoast. There's immense stretches yet that are unsurveyed and practically unexplored. Remember, this one province, it's bigger'n Oregon, Washington and Idaho rolled together.

Three mountain ranges cross it, from north to south. Heading out of it are two of the mightiest rivers in America—the Columbia and the Fraser. And hundreds of miles north of our boundary lie immense valleys where the old West survives in the shape o' great cattle ranches, sure-enough cowboys in hairy pants, and blanket Injuns.

Like I say, getting up there wasn't practical till the roads came. Now you can travel 800 miles from Vancouver to Hazelton, mighty near to Alaska. And in the past summer, the Big Bend link was finished, so that now at last there's a trans-Canada highway.

Life in the Raw

You don't have to go far back off the traveled routes to find life in the raw, a good deal the same as during the days of the Hudson's Bay Company fur trade, 100 years ago. For instance, a licensed trapper or prospector is entitled to shoot game for his own use at any time of year. Game up yonder means moose, caribou, elk, besides the smaller species. And there's plenty of grizzlies amongst the bear population.

What Americans call forest or timber, the Canadian folks speak of as "the bush." Back in the bush, specially in the section called the Cariboo Country, are lakes that don't even appear on the map. Hundreds of 'em, large and small, that have never echoed to a gunshot or known the thrilling screech of a fishin' reel.

Hunting is expensive for a outsider or *chechako*. The license fee of $25 is only the start of it. There's guide and pack train fees, and special fees for bringing out game. So little ol' thimbleriggers like me don't pack guns up yonder.

If you go in for fishing in them primitive haunts, that comes more reasonable. A $5 license fixes up the American pilgrim. The general limit is fifteen fish. But that's enough. They run big.

No Fish Story

While I was up yonder, a old-timer come in off a long lake and mentioned catching a 85-pound lake trout, along with a little one that hefted only 45 pounds. A doubtful-minded tourist thought the old-timer was a glorified liar. Until he found

out that 45-pound wallopers ain't uncommon.

Some o' the lakes in Canada are important traffic ways. A ferry runs the length o' the Okanogan for some sixty miles.

They steam for more'n 100 miles up and down Arrow Lake, down almost to the boundary just north o' Spokane. Log tugs go 100 miles up the Fraser River to Hope. This Arrow Lake is actually part o' the Columbia River, which flows through it. When Grand Coulee Dam is finished, we'll have a lake on the American side around 120 miles long. Yessir, folks, it's a big country.

Big as it is, the population o' Canada is about one-tenth of the 130 million in the United States. It's prob'ly the sparsest settled part o' the earth's surface, exceptin' perhaps upper Siberia. Mexico has a Indian population of 16 million—more'n the total of whites that inhabit Canada.

Easy Travel in Winter

Long travel in "the bush" is easier in winter than in summer. The natives

(Continued on page 9)

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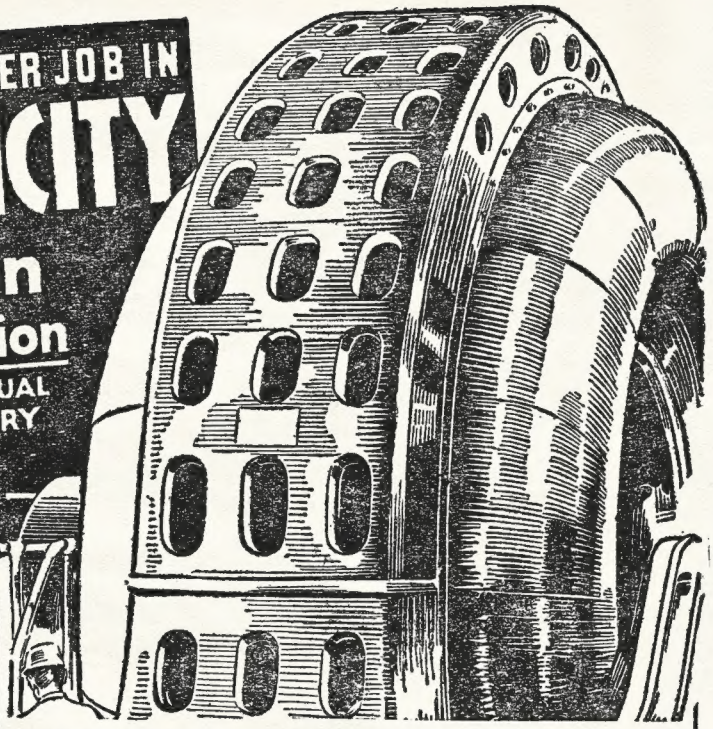

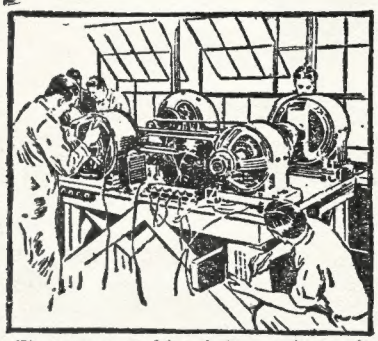

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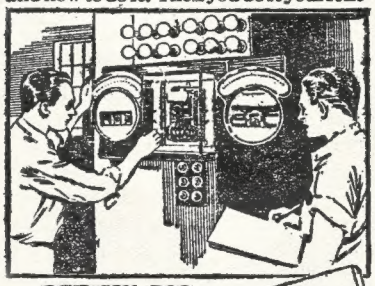

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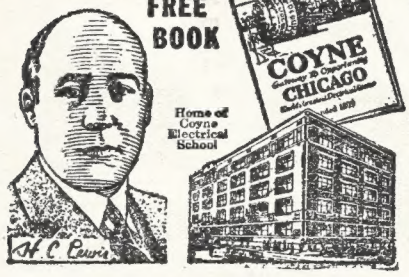

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Now another change is taking place. An old established industry—an integral and important part of the nation's structure—in which millions of dollars change hands every year—is in thousands of cases being replaced by a truly astonishing, simple invention which does the work better—more reliably—AND AT A COST OFTEN AS LOW AS 2% OF WHAT IS ORDINARILY PAID! It has not required very long for men who have taken over the rights to this valuable invention to do a remarkable business, and show earnings which in these times are almost unheard of for the average man.

EARNINGS

One man in California earned over $1,600 per month for three months—close to $5,000 in 90 days' time. Another writes from Delaware—"Since I have been operating (just a little less than a month of actual selling) and not the full day at that, because I have been getting organized and had to spend at least half the day in the office; counting what I have sold outright and on trial, I have made just a little in excess of one thousand dollars profit for one month." A man working small city in N. Y. State made $10,805 in 9 months. Texas man nets over $300 in less than a week's time. Space does not permit mentioning here more than these few random cases. However, they are sufficient to indicate that the worthwhile future in this business is coupled with immediate earnings for the right kind of man. One man with us has already made over a thousand sales on which his earnings ran from $5 to $60 per sale and more. A great deal of this business was repeat business. Yet he had never done anything like this before coming with us. That is the kind of opportunity this business offers. The fact that this business has attracted to it such business men as former bankers, executives of businesses—men who demand only the highest type of opportunity and income—gives a fairly good picture of the kind of business this is. Our door is open, however, to the young man looking for the right field in which to make his start and develop his future.

Not a "Gadget"— Not a "Knick-Knack"—

But a valuable, proved device which has been sold successfully by business novices as well as seasoned veterans.

Make no mistake—this is no novelty—no flimsy creation which the inventor hopes to put on the market. You probably have seen nothing like it yet—perhaps never dreamed of the existence of such a device—yet it has already been used by corporations of outstanding prominence—by dealers of great corporations—by their branches—by doctors, newspapers, publishers—schools—hospitals, etc., etc., and by thousands of small business men. You don't have to convince a man that he should use an electric bulb to light his office instead of a gas lamp. Nor do you have to sell the same business man the idea that some day he may need something like this invention. The need is already there—the money is usually being spent right at that very moment—and the desirability of saving the greatest part of this expense is obvious immediately.

Some of the Savings You Can Show

You walk into an office and put down before your prospect a letter from a sales organization showing that they did work in their own office for $11 which formerly could have cost them over $200. A building supply corporation pays our man $70, whereas the bill could have been for $1,600! An automobile dealer pays our representative $15, whereas the expense could have been over $1,000. A department store has expense of $88.60, possible cost if done outside the business being well over $2,000. And so on. We could, not possibly list all cases here. These are just a few of the many actual cases which we place in your hands to work with. Practically every line of business and every section of the country is represented by these field reports which hammer across dazzling, convincing money-saving opportunities which hardly any business man can fail to understand.

Profits Typical of the Young, Growing Industry

Going into this business is not like selling something offered in every grocery, drug or department store. For instance, when you take a $7.50 order, $5.83 can be your share. On $1,500 worth of business, your share can be $1,167.00. The very least you get as your part of every dollar's worth of business you do is 67 cents—on ten dollars' worth $6.70, on a hundred dollars' worth $67.00—in other words two thirds of every order you get is yours. Not only on the first order—but on repeat orders—and you have the opportunity of earning an even larger percentage.

This Business Has Nothing to Do With House to House Canvassing

Nor do you have to know anything about high-pressure selling. "Selling" is unnecessary in the ordinary sense of the word. Instead of hammering away at the customer and trying to "force" a sale, you make a dignified, business-like call, leave the installation—whatever size the customer says he will accept—at our risk, let the customer sell himself after the device is in and working. This does away with the need for pressure on the customer—it eliminates the handicap of trying to get the money before the customer has really convinced himself 100%. You simply tell what you offer, showing proof of success in that customer's particular line of business. Then leave the invention without a dollar down. It starts working at once. In a few short days, the installation should actually produce enough cash money to pay for the deal, with profits above the investment coming in at the same time. You then call back, collect your money. Nothing is so convincing as our offer to let results speak for themselves without risk to the customer! While others fail to get even a hearing, our men are making sales running into the hundreds. They have received the attention of the largest firms in the country, and sold to the smallest businesses by the thousands.

No Money Need Be Risked

in trying this business out. You can measure the possibilities and not be out a dollar. *If you are looking for a business that is not overcrowded*—a business that is just coming into its own—on the upgrade, instead of the downgrade—a business that offers the buyer relief from a burdensome, but unavoidable expense—a business that has a prospect practically in every office, store, or factory into which you can set foot—regardless of size—*that is a necessity* but does not have any price cutting to contend with as other necessities do—that because you control the sales in exclusive territory is your own business—*that pays more on some individual sales than many men make in a week and sometimes in a month's time*—if such a business looks as if it is worth investigating, *get in touch with us at once* for the rights in your territory—don't delay—because the chances are that if you do wait, someone else will have written to us in the meantime—and if it turns out that you were the better man—we'd both be sorry. So for convenience, *use the coupon below*—but send it right away—or wire if you wish. But do it now. *Address*

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THE HOME CORRAL

(Continued from page 6)

caper over it on snowshoes, then. That word "bush" strikes you odd, in describing towering firs and cedars as thick through at the base as a small house.

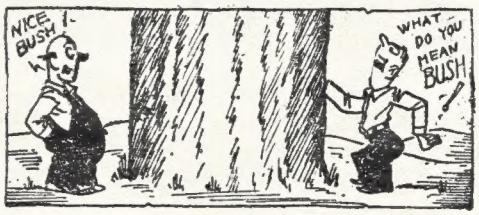
The Rocky Mountain divide bounds British Columbia on the east. The long, continental backbone slopes down to the prairie provinces of central Canada—Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba.

This year produced a bumper wheat crop on the prairies. Canada found herself with 600 million bushels on hand. She consumes no more'n 100 million bushels. What she'll do with the surplus half-billion bushels, more than her granaries can hold, is one o' the present problems o' this sad, tangled ol' world.

A good deal the same situation confronts the pork output and the beef that comes from the huge cattle ranges. Too much food in one-half o' the world. Not enough in the other half, with famine staring whole populations in the face. It makes a man wonder.

A Salmon Is a Taxpayer!

Another important food is produced from the salmon canneries. The gill-netters get from 40 to 45 cents a fish when the run



is on. By the time it reaches market, it costs that much per pound. One reason being that as soon as a salmon gits inside a tin-can he becomes a heavy taxpayer.

Lumber, specially in fir, for flooring, ties and poles, is British Columbia's mainstay. It's good to observe that they're gettin' away from the old-time wasteful methods.

Mighty little is wasted nowadays. A smart Vancouver citizen invented a sawdust burner for cooking and heating. In that part o' Canada, sawdust has largely taken the place o' oil fuel, coal and cordwood. Fir sawdust is an important commodity. It sells around $2 for what's called a "unit," which looks something like a cotton bale.

The sawdust is chucked loose into a bin and feeds automatic, forming a sort of gas that burns hot and clean. Anybody ever seen sawdust burners in the States? Not me.

Rocky Mountain Rangers

Most western Canadians talk like Americans and know pretty well what's

(Continued on page 10)

Okmulgee, Okla. Hazelton, Pa. Des Moines, Iowa Sioux City, Iowa

Look Men!

Here's a Partial List of States, Cities and Institutions in which GRADUATES of I. A. S. were placed in positions as Finger Print Experts!

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Saginaw, Mich.
Fort Collins, Colo.
Bedford, Ohio
Huntington, W. Va.
Salt Lake City, U.
Taft, California
Jamestown, N. Y.
Phoenixville, Pa.
Rochester, N. Y.
Media, Pa.
Dayton, Ohio
East Chicago, Ind.
Green Bay, Wis.
Nocona, Texas
Neenah, Wis.
Kingfisher, Okla.
Centralia, Wash.
Bismarck, N. D.
Bloomington, Ind.
Cuyahoga Falls, O.
Rock Island, Ill.
Philadelphia, Pa.
Astoria, Oregon
Pendleton, Ind.
St. Joseph, Mo.
State of Illinois
State of Iowa
State of Idaho
State of Colorado
Lima, Ohio
Selma, N. C.

State of Wash.
State of Michigan
State of Utah
State of Ohio
Duluth, Minn.
Detroit, Mich.
Pueblo, Colo.
Idaho Falls, Idaho
Ogden, Utah
Lorain Co., Ohio
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Lincoln, Nebr.
Birmingham, Ala.
Columbus, Ohio
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New Haven, Conn.
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Galveston, Texas
Pensacola, Fla.
Stillwater, Okla.

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Houston, Texas
Waterloo, Iowa
Victoria, B. C.
Baton Rouge, La.
Atlantic City, N. J.
E. Lansing, Mich.
Globe, Arizona
London, Ont., Can.
Henryetta, Okla.
Seattle, Wash.
Ferndale, Mich.
McAlester, Okla.
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Lawton, Okla.
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Roanoke, Va.
Glendale, Calif.
Hawaiian Islands
Drumright, Okla.

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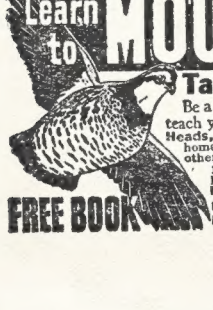

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FREE BOOK

(Continued from page 9)

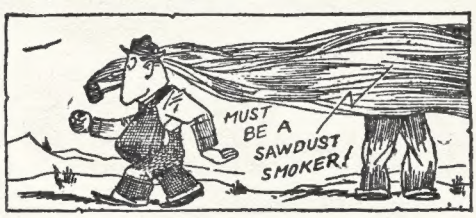
going on to the south. They know more about us, a whole lot more than we know about them, though they don't travel as much, unless it's in troopships. One o' their noted regiments is called the Rocky Mountain Rangers.

Vancouver Island is a world in itself. It's about 300 miles long, with the old-world city o' Victoria the provincial capital. The coast is wild and indented with a maze o' inlets and bays. A highway goes along the inner or Georgia Inlet side for about 200 miles. In the island's center lies the wonderland called Forbidden Plateau.

Land of Eternal Snow

The elevation is around 4,000 feet, with peaks up to 7,000 feet above the sea. It's the land of eternal snow—pink snow, what's more. Yessir, actually pink it is, folks. Caused by some animal growth, I'm told. Numerous lakes containing Kamloops and cut-throat trout and land-locked salmon. Good trails into it. Tall timber, splendid views and Alpine flowers all summer.

On account o' the warmish sweep o' the Japanese Current, western Canada is a heap warmer in the winter than the same latitudes in eastern Canada. Last winter,



the temperature and the amount o' snowfall was about the same as Atlanta, Georgia! Howsomever, it was a specially mild winter out West, and a specially cold one down South.

Grouse, pheasant, ducks and geese fill out the larder o' many a settler back in the "bush." They also smoke their own fish, a lot o' them. And wild berries picking is a plum' serious occupation in "puttin' up season, along in June and July. Saskatoon berries, that look like huckleberries, odd-tasting salmon berries, thimble berries, service berries, blacks, raspberries, huckleberries and, on the prairies, buffalo berries are the main ones.

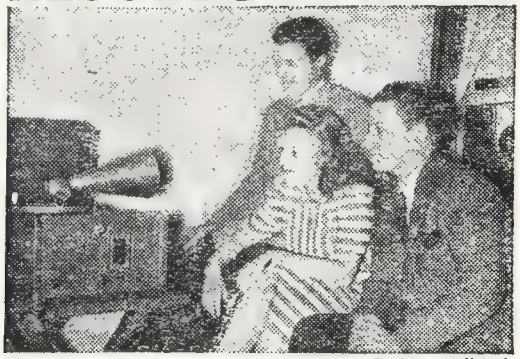
Something hard for the restless Yankeeland pilgrim to get used to is Canada's Wednesday half-holiday. Stores and almost every place o' business close at noon. In nice weather, workin' folks take that time to go out picknicking, boating, fishing or tending garden. They're a outdoor breed. They observe the Sabbath day o' rest stricter than we 'uns below the 49th parallel.

No Saloons

Canada grows most of her own tobacco and manufactures her own brands o' ciga-

(Continued on page 111)

MAKE YOUR OWN RECORDS AT HOME



Charlie Barnet with Judy Ellington and Larry Taylor, vocalists in his band, listen to a record they just made with Home Recordo.

Now a new invention permits you to make a professional-like recording of your own singing, talking or instrument playing. Any one can quickly and easily make phonograph records and play them back at once. Record your voice or your friends' voices. If you play an instrument, you can make a record and you and your friends can hear it as often as you like. You can also record orchestras of favorite radio programs right off the air and replay them whenever you wish.

Find Out If You Have Professional Talent

The movies . . . radio . . . stage in both Broadway and Hollywood are ever seeking new talent.

Before spending money for an audition, make a "home record" of your voice or instrument and mail it to a reliable agency . . . you might be one of the lucky ones to find fame and success thru this easy method of bringing your talents before the proper authorities.

IT'S LOTS OF FUN, TOO!

You'll get a real thrill out of home recording. Surprise your friends by letting them hear your voice as though it were broadcast. Record a snappy talking feature. Record jokes and you will become the life of the party. Great to help train your voice and to cultivate speech . . . nothing to practice . . . you st rt recording at once. No other mechanical or electrical devices needed. Everything necessary included. Nothing else to buy. Just sing, speak or play and HOME RECORDO unit which operates on any electric or old type phonograph will do the recording on special blank records we furnish. You can immediately play the record back as often as you wish. Make your home movie a talking picture with HOME RECORDO. Simply make the record while filming and play back while showing the picture.

THINK OF IT! I JUST MADE THIS RECORD WITH THE NEW HOME RECORDO!
IT'S WONDERFUL —AND SO SIMPLE —PLEASE LET ME MAKE A RECORD.
YES, BOB, AND IT SURE SOUNDS LIKE YOUR VOICE!

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Everything is included. Nothing else to buy and nothing else to pay. You get complete HOME RECORDING UNIT which includes special recording needle, playing needles, 6 two-sided unbreakable records (equivalent to 12 records). Also included guide attachment combination recording playback unit suitable for recording a skit, voice, instrument or radio broadcast. Additional 2-sided blank records cost only $.75 per dozen.

COMPLETE OUTFIT INCLUDING SIX TWO-SIDED BLANK RECORDS, ONLY..... **$2.98**

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Send entire HOME RECORDING OUTFIT (including 6 two-sided records) described above by return mail. I will pay postman $2.98, plus postage, on arrival. (Send cash or money order now for $3.00 and save postage.)

Send..... additional blank records at $.75 per dozen.

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GET READY NOW FOR 1941 EXAMINATIONS

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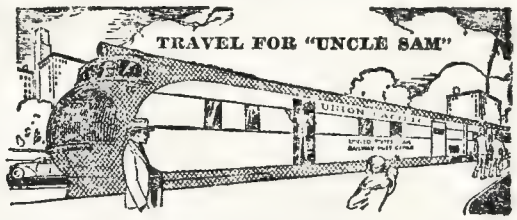
Railway Postal Clerks

Railway Postal Clerks get $1,900 the first year regular, being paid on the first and fifteenth of each month. ($79.17 each pay day.) Their pay is automatically increased yearly to $2,450. Advance may be had to Chief Clerk at $2,700 a year. ($112.50 each pay day.) Age 18 to 35.



3 Days On --- 3 Days Off --- Full Pay

Railway Postal Clerks on long runs usually work 3 days and have 3 days off duty or in the same proportion. During this off duty their pay continues just as though they were working. They travel on a pass when on business. When they grow old, they are retired with a pension.

City Mail Carriers, Post Office Clerks

Clerks and Carriers now get $1,700 the first year on regular and automatically increase $100 a year to $2,100 and $2,300. Age 18 to 48.

Ass't Statistical Clerk

Open to Men — Women 18 to 50. Entrance salary $1,620 year. Appointments as Clerks in the Departments at Washington, D. C., are made from this examination.

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Many other positions are obtainable. Those wishing these positions should prepare at once.

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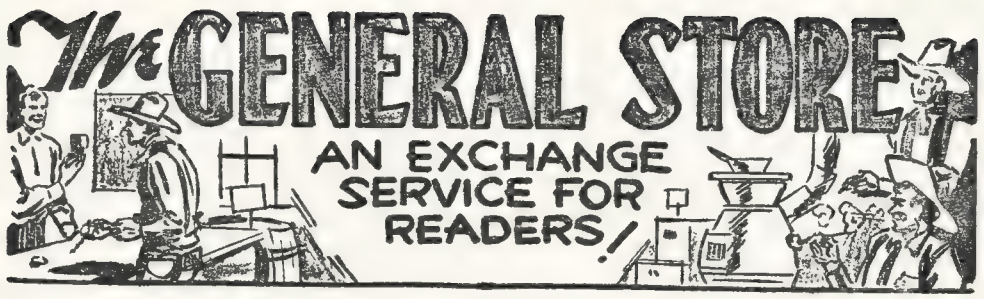

HERE'S where you can exchange something you have but don't want for something someone else has that you do want. This is a FREE service.

For example: if you have a camera, and don't use it, and would like to have a stamp album, write: "Have Eastman camera, No. 1, Jr. make, 3 years old, good condition, will exchange for stamp album with 3,000 stamps, 25 countries.—John Smith, 49 Park St., Albany, N. Y."

Please limit your request to 25 words. No goods for sale listed, nor requests concerning firearms or any illegal articles.

Type or hand-print clearly, in submitting announcements. POPULAR WESTERN will not be responsible for losses sustained. Make very plain just what you have and just what you want to "swap" it for. Enclose a clipping of this announcement with your request. Address: General Store, Popular Western, 22 West 48th Street, New York. N. Y.

I will give 10 postcard views of this state for every 100 foreign stamps sent me. Will also swap stamps with collectors in New Zealand. Claude Gibson, Box 514, Arno, Virginia.

Wanted: Camera, binoculars, musical instruments. Have: Printing supplies, commemorative medals, U. S. and foreign stamps. Morris Gometz, 4425 18th Avenue, Brooklyn, New York.

Will trade typewriter, rod and reel, checkwriter, pressure gauge, for lots of other things. Get my list. George Hill, 4021 North Florissant Avenue, St. Louis, Missouri.

Have 14 airplane pictures, size 2⅛ by 1⅛, and 2⅛ by 1. What have you? John McCarthy, 39 Johnston Avenue, Whitinsville, Massachusetts.

Have three complete body-building courses. What have you? Joe Zubrick, 2010 Ocean Avenue, Brooklyn, New York.

500 different postcard views, foreign and U. S. stamps to trade for U. S. ½ pennies, ½dimes, ½ dollars, 2 and 3 cent pieces. R. W. Hedrick, 2036 North Darien Street, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

Swap money-making plans, secrets, formulas, electric dry shavers, pictures, for anything of equal value. Send list. Ralph F. Ryden, Johnsonburg, Pennsylvania.

Stamp album with hundreds of illustrations and spaces for nearly 2,000 stamps, 100 foreign stamps and 28 different U. S. stamps. Want camera or film developing outfit. Hugh Smith, Box R-88, Mayo, Florida.

Have stamp album with several hundred stamps, magical apparatus, chemical glassware, radio parts, prefer microscope or what have you. W. Rossin, 43 Taft Avenue, Staten Island, New York.

Air mail stamps wanted, any country. Will give one and one-half times as much catalog value other fine stamps. Paul W. Newman, 1604 N.W. 46th Street, Miami, Florida.

Have 1-16 mm. projector, 1-16 mm. camera 100 ft. cap., two 35 mm. 1,000 ft. suitcase projectors (silent), motor driven, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 reel silent films. Want 16 or 35 mm. sound equipment. Albert L. Peters, 2106 A Street, Augusta, Georgia.

Send 25 or more different stamps with three cents. Receive same amount plus a Colorado scenic view, tax token and hobby mail. View cards exchanged. E. L. Parr, 405 Ash Street, Trinidad, Colorado.

Have 10 acres good land and homesite in Florida, also camera, precancelled stamps, want auto, land in western state, or? John Platko, Box 32, Camillus, New York.

Will swap 40 U. S. stamps for 1799 large cent or 1913 Liberty nickel, also good camera for 1804 U. S. silver dollars. Luther Mack, Box 125, Pascola, Missouri.

Will send 10 New Zealand used stamps including four new centennials for five U. S. unused 3c stamps. Complete set mint Centennials for 30 U. S. 3c stamps. A Mervyn Branks, 5 Dublin Street, Invercargill, New Zealand.

Have several of the hard to find Indian head and Lincoln pennies, Liberty and Buffalo nickels to trade for Indian heads. John Fettkether, 407 Woodbury Street, Marshalltown, Iowa.

Will swap 16 mm. movie projector and books for U. S. stamps or what have you. David Belcher, 23 Hollis Street, Greer, South Carolina.

Tattooing outfit, antique glass, coins, guitar, banjo, trumpet, accordion, typewriter, wrist-watch, courses, kodak, carved ivory figures, for offer. E. J. Miller, 433 Main St., Norfolk, Virginia.

Will swap match book covers or postcards for same from all over the world. Zelma Lang, 413 W. 2nd Street, New Albany, Indiana.

Auto cleaner polish formula. Exceptionally good. Compares with best. Cost 45c per gallon to make. Take anything. What have you? V. Colton, 4807 N. Hermitage Avenue, Chicago, Illinois.

Will exchange Foth Derby F 3.5 camera, with case and shoulder strap, perfect condition, for Argus A-F or A-2-F camera and case in good condition. L. Buck, Carolina, Rhode Island.

For every 25 U. S. precancelled stamps sent, will send one Indian head cent. B. C. Campbell, Box 178, Tullahoma, Tennessee.

Want books by Edgar Rice Burroughs. Have pillow cases, luncheon sets, scarfs, aprons, etc. Miss Beulah Meador, Route 3, Box 579, Dallas, Texas.

Banjo, Spanish-American saber, fishing rods, stamps and albums to exchange for old U. S. stamps and covers. L. C. Fuller, Waterville, Maine.

Wanted: Indian head and large cents, 1938 Jefferson and Liberty nickels. Have stamps, match covers, cards and other items. Mr. C. J. Baker, Joy, Illinois.

Have 10-gallon hat, World War medals, auto radio. Want guitar, farm radio, movie machine. Harvey R. Hollman, E. O. S. S. Hospital, Talihina, Oklahoma.

Have telescope, old records, deck cards; will exchange for 1½ volt radio. Laura Bolander, Bockus, Minnesota.

Do *You* Smile at the Idea of Learning Music by Mail?

Here Are Some Facts That May Surprise You!

YOU HAVE undoubtedly heard of the U. S. School method of teaching music by mail. This remarkable system of instruction has been in operation for over forty years and more than 700,000 people in all parts of the world have enrolled for it. Men, women and children of all ages and from all walks of life have taken up their favorite musical instruments this convenient, money-saving way. They have studied the piano, violin, guitar, accordion and, in short, every kind of popular instrument.

No Special Talent Required

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A Novelet of the Chisholm Trail

Buffalo

Buffalo Billy fired, and the redskin fell off his horse, dead

A Hard-Riding, Hard-Fighting Indian Scout Ramrods a Trail Herd and Delivers Six-Gun Toll to a Rustling Crew of Indians Who Wreak Havoc on the Range!

CHAPTER I

On the Chisholm Trail

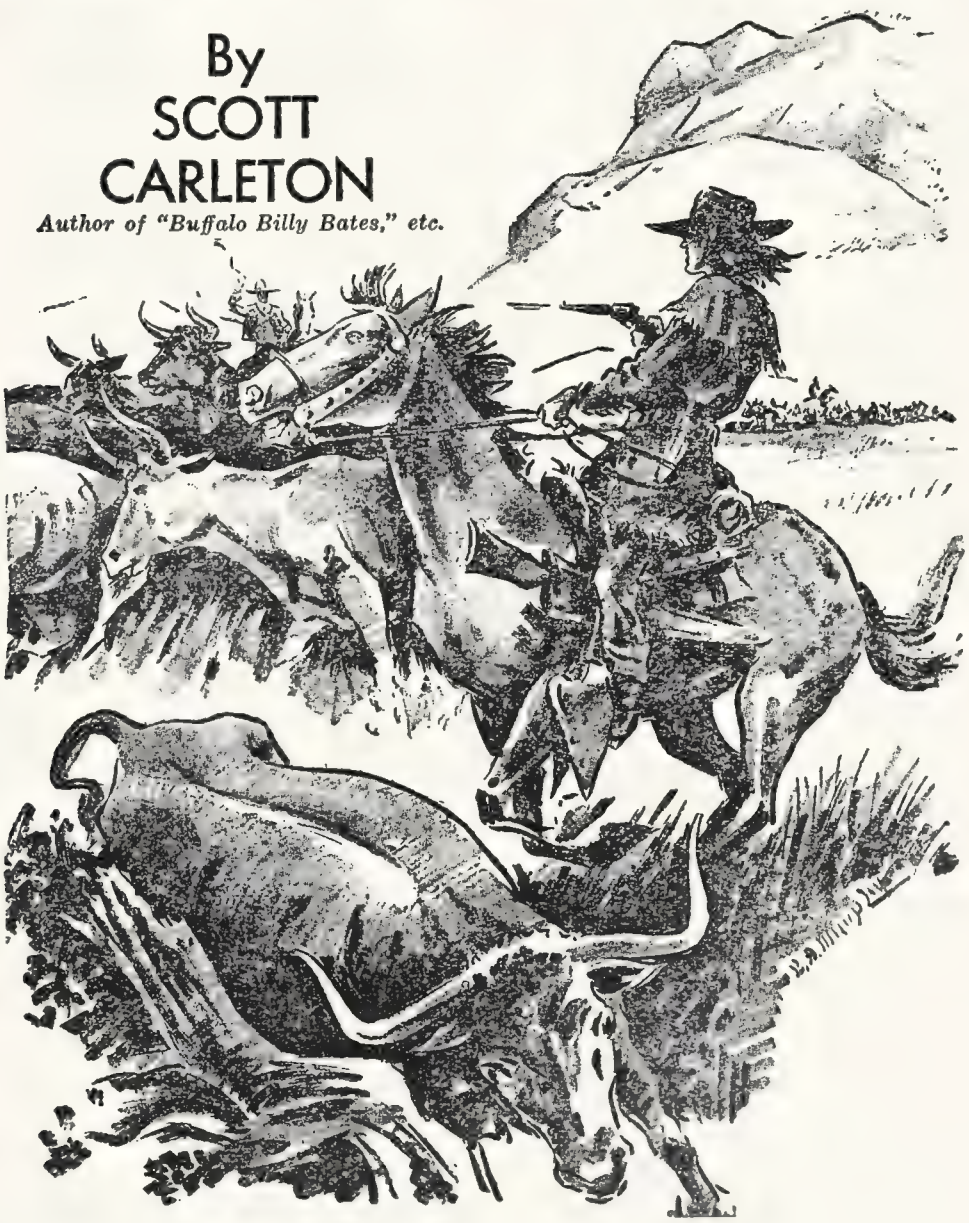
DUSK was creeping over the grassy plains when Thack Tipton rode into his Double T camp, and dismounted near the chuck-wagon. He had placed his night herders to ride circle around the trail herd of Texas longhorn steers bedded down on the flat, and the rest of the crew was busy eating when the trail boss spoke for his own supper.

"Burn my meat, and pile the beans high, Limpy," he told the weazened old cooky. "I'm so hungry I could eat a she-wolf with the hair left on."

"Double that order for a friend, Limpy," a deep voice echoed from the lengthening shadows, and the speaker

Billy's Reward

By
SCOTT
CARLETON
Author of "Buffalo Billy Bates," etc.



stepped from behind a tangle of mesquite.

Thack Tipton whirled on his heel with a surprised grunt. He was sure that no one had followed him from the herd, and he had posted a guard because of the marauding Indian bands that infested the Strip. All the Double T men were accounted for, and that voice belonged to a stranger.

"Howdy, Tipton," the tall young stranger greeted with a smile, and made the sign of peace with his right hand high, and the palm turned outward. "I trailed yuh here to yore camp, and we might talk some trade after we eat our grub."

"It's Buffalo Bill hisself," a thick voice sneered nastily. "I've got him covered, Boss!"

The young stranger was an even six feet tall, with long brown hair hanging down to his shoulders from under a flat beaver hat. His hunting shirt was made of soft buckskin, and his moccasined feet made no sound as he whirled to face a wide-shouldered cowboy who glared at him from behind a cocked six-shooter.

The tough Texas cowboys stared at the young hunter and guessed his age at somewhere near nineteen. Tall as a pine, and wide across the shoulders, with a clear steady expression in his wide, tawny eyes.

"Yore mistake, Bull Barton," he corrected the threatening trail hand. "I'm Buffalo Billy Bates from Santy Fee. I made the sign of peace, and yuh oughta know better'n to skin yore gun when a man walks out into the clear."

His tawny eyes watched the scowling cowboy without winking, but they narrowed at the corners when "Bull" Barton took a step toward him. Barton's finger was tightening inside the trigger guard as his gun swept up to cover the intruder's heart.

BUFFALO BILLY BATES acted instinctively, and like a coiled steel spring. He was faster than the flash of Bull Barton's exploding six-shooter when he dived under the gun with both arms spread wide. His shoulders drove against the thick legs and brought Barton to the ground, and Buffalo Billy rolled clear and snatched up the smoking .45 Colts.

The group of cowboys around the fire were still holding their tin plates in grimy hands when Buffalo Billy came up facing them. Now his eyes were almost yellow, and blazing with the light of battle. Long, powerful muscles stood out like ropes as he flexed his wide shoulders.

"I bring peace, but you *vaqueros* can have war if yuh want it!" he said softly, but his deep voice was grim. "Yore pard meant to kill me before I could make medicine with the boss!"

The tough Texas cowboys looked Buffalo Billy over without moving. They could read sign with the best, and they recognized a veteran fighter who was old beyond his years.

"Lay yore hackles, Buffaler," the old cook said soothingly. "I've heard all about yuh, and Bull Barton had it comin' to him. Mind his knife!"

Once again Buffalo Billy reacted swiftly. He jumped to the left and landed lightly on his moccasins just as a gleaming skinning knife whined through the twilight. The pointed blade flicked the beaded hem of his long hunting shirt.

Bull Barton surged to his feet and followed the flight of his heavy knife. He launched his two hundred pounds of bone and seasoned muscle in a charging drive at his young enemy, but the long-haired youth met the attack with a soft grunt.

Buffalo Billy dropped to his left knee and met the driving body with his right shoulder. He surged up just as Bull Barton's bulk thudded solidly. Barton flew through the air like a side of dressed beef.

Buffalo Billy was on his feet, and he turned like a hunting cat. His right hand tossed the captured six-shooter to "Limpy" Johnson. The crippled old cook caught the gun and spoke for all the crew.

"Make him fight, Buffaler! Pour it on that hulking son, and larn him a passel of manners!"

Thack Tipton was Texan from high hat to his spurred boots. He could read men as easily as he could read the brands on range cattle, and he realized that Buffalo Billy Bates did

not know the meaning of fear. Bull Barton had whipped every man in the Double T crew, but this long-haired youngster was of a different breed.

Billy Bates was only nineteen years old, as the men had guessed, but he had spent every one of those years with hard plainsmen who never admitted defeat. Bull Barton outweighed him by thirty pounds, but the young hunter shrugged lightly and carried the fight to his brawny foe.

Bull Barton dug in with his heels, and drew his bullet head down between his wide shoulders. His thick body drove forward like a battering ram, with both huge fists pumping like oaken clubs.

Buffalo Billy stepped aside like a shadow, and thrust out his left foot. His right fist crashed down on the back of Barton's neck when the trail driver stumbled. Bull Barton went down on hands and knees.

Billy Bates was on top of him like a mountain cat jumping a wild colt. His lithe body straddled the big man's back, and his hands whipped down and locked under Barton's chin. Then Billy threw himself backward to flip Bull Barton flat on his broad back.

Buffalo Billy twitched his long hunting shirt aside and drew a skinning knife from the beaded scabbard at the back of his belt. His left hand caught Barton by the throat, and Barton gasped when the shining knife touched his bulging Adam's apple.

"Yuh still want war?" he asked the helpless man quietly, but his deep voice hummed like brass.

BULL BARTON stared with his little eyes almost bulging from their deep sockets. The color drained from his tanned face to leave it a sickly green, and his voice was a husky, pleading whisper.

"Take him off me, Boss! I can't stand cold steel!"

Buffalo Billy curled his lips and leaned slightly against his honed knife. Bull Barton screamed when the blade nicked his tough skin, and his powerful muscles turned flaccid with weakness and terror.

Thack Tipton clenched his teeth and swiftly drew his belt pistol. He stepped up behind Buffalo Billy and jammed the muzzle against the young hunter's spine.

"Unclutch that knife before I drop hammer!" he growled hoarsely. "I don't like cold steel no more than Bull does!"

Buffalo Billy Bates did not even turn his head. His left hand tightened on Bull Barton's throat, and his voice was only a whisper of sound when he gave the Double T boss the go-ahead.

"Cut 'er loose, Tipton. But I'll slit Barton's windpipe regardless!"

Thack Tipton leaned against his heavy pistol while the sweat poured from his saddle-toughened body. He could kill the young hunter, but he also knew that Buffalo Billy Bates would take Bull Barton with him to the Happy Hunting Ground. The Double T boss sighed and slowly holstered his six-shooter.

"You ain't a cold killer, Billy," he murmured, with a surprising change of front. "Let Barton up, and yuh can have his job if yuh want it."

"I've got a job," Buffalo Billy answered quietly, but he released his hold and sprang lightly to his feet. "I was jest teachin' him manners." He winked at Thack Tipton. "No hard feelin's on my part."

Bull Barton rolled over and struggled to his feet. He swallowed noisily and rubbed his throat while his little eyes stared at Buffalo Billy, with a look of wonder spreading across his round bearded face. Then he took a quick step forward and thrust out his blocky right hand.

"I was a fool, Billy," he said huskily. "I don't deserve it, but I'd like to be friends!"

Buffalo Billy Bates swung his right arm and thwacked palms with the

humbled giant. Bull Barton winced as steel fingers bit deep into his hardened flesh, but his bearded lips parted in a grin of relief, mixed with surprised pleasure.

"Every man needs friends down here among enemies," Buffalo Billy said heartily. "After this me and you will fight for each other, Bull. Now I'd like for yuh to tell me why yuh tried so hard to lift my scalp!"

"I tagged yuh for a rustler, Billy," Bull Barton admitted without evasion. "Lefty Fargo is prowlin' here in the Strip, and most of his gang wears their hair long."

Buffalo Billy remained calm, but his eyes glowed with excitement. His right hand touched the heavy six-shooter in the skin holster fastened to his beaded belt, and the nostrils of his long, straight nose flared widely.

"That's why I rode into camp," he said quietly. "I saw Lefty Fargo's gang over on the Cimarron, and they are headin' this way. I'll talk some more after I fill out the wrinkles in my belly. How about a bait of hot grub, Cooky?"

LIMPY JOHNSON piled a tin plate high with steaming food, and poured a quart cup of cowboy coffee which hung in a blackened pot from a gauch hook. Buffalo Billy sat down on his crossed legs and wolfed his food hungrily. Thack Tipton sat on his heels and pulled on his pipe, knowing that Billy Bates would not speak until he had finished his meal.

"Strongest yearlin' I ever ran up against," Bull Barton told Limpy Johnson. "He looks a heap like Buffalo Bill Cody, and he moves about like a redskin."

"Cunnel Cody taught Buffalo Billy all he knows," the old cook grunted. "The way Billy got into camp without being seen ought to tell yuh he was raised among the Injuns. I wonder where in tarnation he left his hosses?"

Billy Bates wiped his plate with a slab of bannock and stretched to his feet. His lean waist made his powerful shoulders seem wider, and his moccasined feet made no sound when he moved like a cat and slipped into the deep shadows beyond the fire.

Thack Tipton grunted and glanced at Limpy Johnson. Both were past fifty, and wise with the maturity that only comes with the years. The old cook nodded reassuringly, and the Double T boss settled back to wait.

CHAPTER II

The Bargain

TEN minutes later Buffalo Billy rode up to the wagon on a deep-chested pinto mustang. Now the young hunter carried a skin-covered rifle across his knees, and a leggy bay horse followed with a bed roll on his sleek back. The pinto wore a war bridle around its lower jaw, and the trained buffalo horse stood like a statue when Billy slid down and dropped the rawhide reins to the ground.

"Injuns out yonder, Boss," Buffalo Billys aid to Thack Tipton. "They must be a hundred braves in that Kiowa party, but they ain't painted for war."

"They'll get war if they try to stampede my herd," the old cattleman promised grimly. "What was this trade yuh had on yore mind?"

Buffalo Billy sat on his hunkers and stared into the embers of the dying fire. His fingers moved as though he were counting, and the cowboys watched him curiously. Their night horses were tied to the rear wheels of the chuckwagon, and several of the cowboys were already asleep in their blankets.

"Must be close to two thousand head of steers in that beef herd," Billy

Bates murmured slowly. "Yuh'd stand to lose at least half of the critters if they stampeded."

"Yeah?" the old Texan grunted, and his gray eyes flashed. "They's fourteen men in this crew, and they'll fight for the iron that pays 'em their wages!"

"They can't fight what they can't see," Buffalo Billy remarked. "And they didn't see me slip into camp."

Old Thack Tipton growled and then looked worried. He had made the drive up from Comanche, Texas, but every trail herd expected to lose some cattle while crossing the strip across the Nation where the Indians were supposed to live on their reservations.

"The Chisholm trail is free," Tipton growled. "Jest like the grass and water."

"Jesse Chisholm blazed that trail for the Government," Buffalo Billy answered quietly. "It was used to move the Indians to their new homes, and the redskins won't give up without a fight."

"We'll give 'em all the fight they want," Tipton muttered angrily, but his eyes widened when Buffalo Billy rolled away from the fire glow and slipped back into the shadows.

A whirring noise whispered across the little clearing from a brushy clump of mesquite. The high-peaked hat jumped from Tipton's grizzled head, and a muffled grunt came from the mesquite, followed by the fall of a body.

Bull Barton hawed in his throat and clawed the six-shooter loose from his holster. He stopped the thumb that was earing back the heavy hammer when Buffalo Billy Bates called softly before stepping into the fire glow. The young hunter was dragging something, and he threw the body of a painted brave near the fire and slowly straightened up.

Thack Tipton stared with his mouth open. The dead Indian was streaked with yellow and crimson paint, and the feathered haft of an arrow protruded from the left side of his deep chest, just over the heart. The old cattleman grunted as he saw the choke-berry hunting bow in Buffalo Billy's right hand.

"YOU killed that redskin," he whispered hoarsely, and then remembered the hat that had been tugged from his head. He picked up his Stetson and pulled a steel-pointed arrow from the heavy felt.

"I saw that bush move," Buffalo Billy answered dryly. "This Injun is a Comanche, and my arrow got him jest as he cut loose his string."

"Raise his hair, Buffaler," old Limpy Johnson grated. "Jest to teach his pards to keep their distance!"

"He meant to kill the boss, and stampede the hoss band," BuffaloBilly muttered, and shook his head. Then he grunted, with a shrug: "I don't take scalps no more."

"Since when don't yuh count coup?" old Limpy demanded. "That ain't the way I heard it up there around Touse and Santy Fee."

"Buffalo Bill allowed it wasn't civilized," the young hunter explained quietly. "I'll drag this brave down by the creek, and we can cave a cut-bank on him come daylight."

The dead Indian was stripped down to his moccasins and clout. Bull Barton bent his thick legs and lifted the body without effort. He followed Buffalo Billy into the darkness, with the dead brave across his shoulder. Old Thack Tipton shuddered and exchanged glances with Limpy Johnson.

"A man ain't safe in this blasted Injun country," he complained irritably. "I wish we'd have stayed down in Texas, but steers is worth ten dollars a head up there in Wichita."

"They ain't worth but a dollar in Texas," the old cook answered with a smile. "And yuh need the money if yuh're goin' to save the Double T spread. If I was you, I'd talk trade with young Buffaler Billy Bates."

Thack Tipton nodded, and motioned

for the young hunter to take a seat when Billy returned to the fire. Billy Bates stamped out the glowing embers first, then he sat on his heels facing the worried cattleman.

"Yuh talked like yuh knew this Chisholm trail," Tipton began. "Yuh got eyes like a cat that can see in the dark, and yuh saved my life. How much to bend the lead until we cross the Arkansas River?"

"Two hundred head of cattle to do with as I please," Buffalo Billy answered promptly.

"Whoa up a spell," Tipton interrupted. "That's ten percent of my herd!"

"Lefty Fargo will take the whole cut," Bull Barton broke in hoarsely. "We'll fight them rustlers if yuh say the word, but yuh better dicker with Billy."

"I sent this Lefty Fargo to jail for stealin' some of my saddle stock," the old cattleman explained to Billy Bates. "He swore to ruin me, but I put it down for bluff."

"That Comanche brave was one of Fargo's gang," Buffalo Billy answered quietly. "And Fargo has twenty more redskins mounted on hosses that are fast as lightnin'."

"What's to stop 'em from slippin' up some dark night and spookin' the herd?" Tipton demanded.

"That's my part of the trade," Buffalo Billy answered gravely. "I'll circle the herd every night, and make up my sleep in the wagon durin' the daytime."

"Cheap at half the price!" Tipton agreed quickly, and offered his hand to seal the bargain.

He winced when Buffalo Billy vised down on his fingers, and Bull Barton chuckled softly.

"If I'm to bend the lead for this outfit, that means I'm trail boss," Buffalo Billy reminded Tipton. "Now I'll strip my ridin' gear and get out there to circle the herd. Me and Bull will ride together—and tell the boys not to strike any matches."

THACK TIPTON shook his head doubtfully and stared at Billy's broad back. A sickle moon was rising, and there was enough light to show the rippling muscles under Buffalo Billy's buckskin shirt. He removed his saddle and mounted the pinto bareback, holding his hunting bow in his right hand.

"Get some sleep," Billy called softly. "Me and Bull will rouse yuh up at daylight. *Adios, amigos.*"

"I'd rather have that young savage for a friend instead of an enemy," Tipton told the old cook soberly. "If anybody can get us through this cussed Strip, Buffalo Billy is that hombre."

Buffalo Billy rode away from camp with big Bull Barton. They could see the herd bedded down on the grassy flat near Wolf Creek, and the soft voices of the night herders carried down the night wind as the cowboys sang to the weary cattle.

"Keep ridin' straight ahead, and don't stop, Bull," Billy whispered to his companion. "There's something back in the brush along the creek, and I want to take a look."

"I'll go with yuh," Bull offered eagerly. "They might ambush yuh if it's redskins, Billy."

"You keep on ridin' to make bait," Billy grunted. "It might be jest a coyote, but I want to make shore. I'll hoot once like a squinch owl if I need any help."

They were in the deep shadows near the creek, and Buffalo Billy reined his pinto deeper into the alder thicket. He slipped from his horse as Bull Barton rode ahead, humming softly. Billy drew three arrows from his quiver.

His moccasined feet made no sound as he crept through the thicket. His right hand fitted an arrow to his bowstring, and Buffalo Billy's tawny eyes widened to take up the gloom. The top of a juniper bush trembled just ahead, and Billy Bates stopped instantly with his bow-string taut.

His eyes widened when a dark shape

rose slowly from the brush. Billy Bates saw an eagle feather sky-lined against the leaden horizon. Then a long bow came into view, and a sinewy naked arm came back to draw the bow-string.

Buffalo Billy clicked his teeth when he saw the hidden Indian's target. Big Bull Barton was crossing the clearing from the creek, with his broad back bulking against the sky-line. Bull Barton was obeying orders, and riding to certain death!

Buffalo Billy straightened his long left arm and drew his bow-string back to the feathers. He loosened the four fingers of his right hand at the same time, grunting softly as the steel-tipped arrow sped true to its mark. The burring twang of his bow-string was followed by a startled gasp. Then a writhing body fell in the crackling brush.

Bull Barton sank his left spur in the flank of his bronc, and wheeled the startled horse. A six-shooter flipped to the big cowboy's right hand, but he held his shot when the soft muted call of a squinch owl came from the shadows near the creek.

"Hold yore fire, Bull," a voice warned softly. "Yuh'll stampede the herd, and this bushwhacker is a good Injun now!"

The big cowboy grunted and swung down from his horse. Buffalo Billy smiled when Bull crouched to keep below the sky-line just in case more Indians were lurking in the alder thicket. A man either learns fast in hostile country, or he loses his hair very quickly.

BUFFALO BILLY was kneeling beside the paint-streaked body of a dead Indian. The feathered haft of a long hunting arrow had been driven through the redskin's heart, and Bull shuddered when Buffalo Billy reached out and drew the dead Indian's knife from the beaded sheath.

"I thought mebbe yuh'd like to keep this blade, Bull," he murmured. "He meant to raise yore hair, and it ought to give yuh some of his medicine."

"He's another Comanche," Barton whispered, as he took the captured knife. "Let's rouse up the camp, Billy."

"The boys need their sleep," Billy Bates murmured. "We won't have any more trouble tonight, because Injun hoss thieves usually work in pairs.

They sneak in on foot, and we've got two of Lefty Fargo's redskins tonight. Let's ride on out to the herd."

Bull Barton wore long bullhide boots that came almost to his knees as protection against the thorny brush. He tucked the Indian knife down inside his right boot, gathered up his bridle reins, and mounted his horse with a new feeling of confidence.

The light from the sickle moon was stronger when the two horses crossed the clearing between the creek and the sleeping herd. Bull Barton began to hum softly to warn the cowboys of their coming, and also to make their presence known to the spooky brush cattle.

Bury me not on the lone pee-rair-ee....

The big cowboy began his song in a low whisper which became stronger as the wind picked up his voice. Every trail herd always had a few "drifters" —lonely steers which wander restlessly on the edge of the herd, and then bed down away from the other cattle.

If a cowboy jumped one of them in the dark, it might result in a stampede. Hocks would rattle and horns would clash, which was why few pilgrims were taken up the long trail. Tipton's crew was composed of veteran cowboys who knew cattle from hocks to horns.

A night herder on the far side took

up Bull Barton's mournful song to indicate that he had recognized his saddle pard. He was a tall, lathy Texan riding a grass-bellied mustang, and his six-shooter glinted in the moonlight as he got a glimpse of Buffalo Billy's long brown hair.

"Hold yore fire, Lanky," Barton whispered swiftly. "Get used to Buffalo Billy Bates, our new trail boss. Lefty Fargo's gang is on the prowl, and Billy done tallied for two of them rustlers since he rode into camp about dusk. Billy, meet up with Lanky Durkin from down in Deaf Smith County."

"Howdy, Bates," the lean Texan murmured, and holstered his old .45 Colts. "I didn't hear any shots," he added slowly, and then he saw the hunting bow in Billy's right hand.

"Yeah," Bull Barton explained softly. "Billy tallied for two Comanches with that little ole bow. He can see in the dark like yore gramma's cat, and he fights like one, Lanky. He whupped the hide offen me when I went on the prod and jumped him back in camp. Knuckles, knives or six-shooters, they's all one to our new boss."

"Yuh had a whuppin' comin', Bull," "Lanky" drawled. "You ain't much for purty, but yuh shore are hell for stout. If Buffalo Billy pegged yuh out like yuh let on, he must be plenty of man."

"Never saw his beat," Bull admitted readily. "I'm proud to be takin' his orders."

"And now you and him gets along well enough to sleep in the same blankets," Lanky said with a chuckle, and nudged his horse with a blunted spur. "We better keep ridin' and meet them other night hawks before they commence keenin' the wind for trouble."

Another rider was walking his horse toward them, singing his monotonous lullaby to the sleeping cattle. Bull Barton again made the introductions, and the night-herders separated to continue their slow circles of the herd.

CHAPTER III

Buffalo Billy Pays Toll

GRAY dawn was plucking at the night curtains in the east when Buffalo Billy rode to camp to rouse out the sleeping crew. Old Limpy Johnson was building a trench fire near the chuckwagon,, and the jingler was bringing in the horse herd. The old wrangler drove the remuda into a rope corral just as the sleepy cowboys crawled from between their blankets and stamped into their high boots.

Buffalo Billy devoured three helpings of flannel cakes and drippings. His eyes were busy sizing up the crew, and he knew what position every man would take when the drive began. Point and swing riders were cleaner than the dusty cowboys who brought up the drag, and they all turned to watch their new trail boss when Buffalo Billy stretched erect and cleared his throat.

"We'll meet that band of Kiowas about sun-up," he told the silent crew. "Don't skin yore guns, and let me do the talkin' to old Yellow Jacket, their chief. I signed on to rod this drive, and knowin' redskins, I want to handle it my own way. Hit yore saddles, and let's get the herd off bed ground."

Dawn was breaking across the great plains when the herd was thinned out for the day's drive. A big blue-roan steer bellowed softly and went out in the lead. The animal had a seven-foot spread of horns, and Buffalo Billy was watching the steer when Thack Tipton rode up to rub stirrups with his new ramrod.

"That's Old Blue, my lead steer," he explained. "He's been up the trail three times. Old Blue is worth three cowboys."

"I spotted him last night," Billy an-

swered, and pointed toward a dust cloud up ahead. "You and me better ride out and meet that Kiowa party—and don't make a play for your gun."

The herd was moving across the grama grass in a long, snaky line, with the big blue steer out in front. Buffalo Billy had changed to his bay horse, which he rode without a saddle, and with a war bridle looped around the lower jaw.

"'Trust in Gawd, but keep yore powder dry,'" the old cattleman muttered crossly. "If that old savage goes on the war-path, I ain't makin' no rash promises!"

Buffalo Billy grinned and lifted his horse into a lope. They topped a little rise just as the sun came up, and Tipton grunted as a long line of Indians raced their ponies across the buffalo wallows to meet them.

"They're not painted for war, Boss," Buffalo Billy told the old cattleman. "You wait here while I ride out to make medicine with old Chief Yellow Jacket."

Thack Tipton grumbled, but he stopped his horse while Buffalo Billy rode on alone to meet the Indians. A tall old Indian waved his hand to stop his followers, and he rode up to Buffalo Billy with both hands above his head.

His right hand was out in the sign of peace, while the fingers of his left grasped a long arrow tufted with red and yellow feathers. When Billy Bates returned the peace sign, the old chief began to talk in the sign language with his hands.

He held up both hands with his fingers spread wide, and then repeated the gesture as he pointed to the Double T herd. Billy Bates wiggled his fingers and nodded his head. Old Yellow Jacket smiled, and waved to his warriors who came up fast on their trained ponies.

Thack Tipton watched the powwow with a puzzled gleam in his gray eyes. His right hand went down to his six-shooter when the Indians separated into two bands and rode toward the beef herd, but Buffalo Billy quartered in front of the old cattleman to stop his horse.

"WE'RE goin' to pay for grass and water, Boss," he explained to Tipton. "Old Chief Yellow Jacket allows that the Great White Father gave this land to the Kiowas, and he also claims that the white men killed off the buffalo. His braves will cut our herd to pay the toll."

"'Millions for defense, but not one cent for tribute!'" the old cattleman roared angrily, then he calmed down some. "How much is the toll?" he growled.

"Twenty head, and I'll pay it out of my percentage," Billy answered gravely. "Old Yellow Jacket will keep the tally, and give me a receipt."

Thack Tipton rode back to warn his cowboys, knowing that they would put up a fight if the Indians got there first. The Texans kept the herd moving slowly, and the Indians selected their beef and cut them out without stopping the drive.

Old Yellow Jacket sat apart, carving notches on the red-feathered arrow with his scalping knife. When twenty steers were bunched off to pay the toll, the old chief rode up to Buffalo Billy and gravely handed him the arrow. Then he lighted an old stone pipe with a sulphur match and took a deep draw.

Buffalo Billy accepted the arrow and counted notches. Old Yellow Jacket had demanded twenty steers, and the tally agreed with the notches on the arrow. Then Billy accepted the peace pipe, and filled his lungs with acrid smoke. The trail herd had paid toll, and the Kiowas would have camp meat until the full moon. . . .

The afternoon wind held a chill edge when Buffalo Billy picked bed ground and rode back toward the grazing herd of cattle. He had scouted ahead to find good grass, and he drummed with his heels when he saw

the big blue lead steer break away toward the left.

Two painted Indians were turning the herd, and the cowboys riding at point were making no effort to keep the leaders straightened out.

Buffalo Billy thundered across the grass-tufted ground. His face was grim as he quartered to the left and turned the big blue steer. One of the Indians yelled and drove his hunting lance into a steer behind the left shoulder.

Buffalo Billy spoke sternly in the Indian tongue as he circled in front of the leaders. The second Indian fitted an arrow to his bow and started to draw back the gut string.

Buffalo Billy Bates moved his right hand like a cat striking at a mouse. His six-shooter cleared leather just as the Comanche brave was loosing his shaft, and the heavy .45 Colt roared like a cannon.

The Indian slid sideward from his horse with a bullet through his treacherous heart. His knees were thrust under a rawhide rope tied under the belly of his spotted horse, but the riata slipped loose to spill the dead brave to the ground in front of the frightened cattle.

"Hold 'em straight!" Buffalo Billy yelled at the Double T cowboys.

He flattened out along the neck of his horse when the second Indian hurled his long hunting lance.

Buffalo Billy jerked erect just in time to see the Indian reach for his hunting bow. He called a warning in the Indian tongue, but the Comanche brave screamed defiantly and notched an arrow to his bow.

Buffalo Billy's tawny eyes were almost yellow as he flipped up his smoking gun and squeezed off a shot. The steel-pointed arrow whizzed past his head, just touching his long flowing hair.

THE Indian jerked back violently. A little black dot leaped between his beady black eyes just before he tumbled from the bare back of his leaping pony. Thack Tipton came racing up with Bull Barton, and the old cattleman was gripping a heavy Sharps' rifle in his gnarled hands.

"Hell's busted loose, Billy!" he shouted. "Ten braves rode up and demanded toll while yuh was scoutin' ahead. They demanded fifty head of beef, and we didn't put up a fight!"

"We'll fight now!" Buffalo Billy said grimly. "These Injuns are Comanches, and they are on the war-path!"

The Double T herd was stampeding across the plains with thundering hoofs and rattling horns. They overtook the lumbering chuckwagon and enveloped it in a cloud of dust.

Billy Bates barked orders above the din.

"Ride down and stop the men in the drag!" he shouted at Bull Barton. "We'll give that war-party all the fight they can hold!"

Bull Barton spurred his horse and hit a high lope to head off the herders riding behind the running herd. A naked Indian was caught in the press, and Bull Barton shrilled the Rebel yell as he sent a slug tearing through the trapped warrior's heart.

Four cowboys dropped out of the dust cloud as the tail end of the stampede roared past Tipton and Buffalo Billy. They were Texans who never had enough fight, and every man had his six-shooter skinned for war.

"Yonder they come!" Bull Barton yelled, and pointed to a group of riders who appeared suddenly from the mouth of a deep buffalo wallow.

Buffalo Billy raised his six-shooter and fired a warning shot into the air. He counted twelve men in the Indian group, and his eyes narrowed when he recognized one white man leading the attack. The others were all Indians, stripped down to their breech clouts and moccasins, with their naked bodies daubed with war-paint.

"That white renegade is Crass Judigan," Thack Tipton muttered thickly.

"He's *segundo* to Lefty Fargo, and those redskins have rifles. Give the word, Billy!"

"Let's make medicine first," Billy Bates suggested, and edged his horse out in front.

The Indians fanned out and came up warily. The white man leading them wore his black hair long, and a brace of heavy Colts was strapped to his long legs. He rode his spotted horse right up to Thack Tipton, but

his beady little eyes were watching Buffalo Billy Bates.

"We're cutting yore herd for toll, Tipton," Judigan announced arrogantly. "Fifty head for grass and water, and fifty more for each of them braves yore crew smoked down!"

"Yuh ain't," Buffalo Billy contradicted bluntly, and his lips curled as he stared hard at "Crass" Judigan. "I killed them two Injun rustlers, and I'm roddin' this Double T drive!"

"And he killed them two hoss thieves yuh sent into our camp last night," Bull Barton added. "Yuh still want to fight?"

Crass Judigan shook the long black hair out of his eyes. He wore the buckskin of the plains, with his pants tucked down into long cowhide boots. His dark face was flushed from the trade whiskey he had shared with the Indians, and his thin lips parted to show blackened, broken teeth.

"Pay our toll, or we'll take yore whole herd," he snarled to Thack Tipton. "We've got yuh out-numbered, and yuh won't have a chance!"

"I'm bossin' this drive," Buffalo Billy said quietly, before the old Texan could answer. "We've paid toll to old Chief Yellow Jacket, and I've got his receipt. Now it's yore deal, Judigan."

"Might be better thataway," the rustler murmured with a sly grin. "We'll settle this thing between you and me, and the rest stays out. I'll tell my redskins, if it suits you thataway."

"Make yore talk," Buffalo Billy accepted instantly. "And name yore own weapons."

"CRASS JUDIGAN turned and spoke briefly in the Comanche tongue. The Indians nodded, with no emotion showing on their copper-hued faces. But beady eyes brightened when Buffalo Billy spoke to them in their own tongue.

"Your white brother speaks with a forked tongue when he tells you to fire on the white men. See the guns they have pointed at their red brothers' hearts. I will fight your white chief, and if I lose, you will cut out your toll. If Judigan loses, you ride away."

"Young white chief heap brave," an old Indian answered gravely. "It will be as you say."

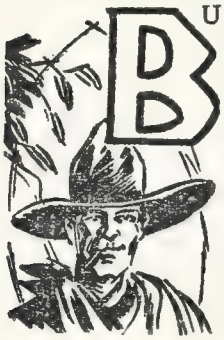
"So yuh savvy Injun?" Judigan sneered. "Mebbe so yuh savvy Injun knife!"

"Me savvy," Billy agreed, without smiling, and slid from his horse.

He skinned off his long hunting shirt and flexed his muscular arms while Crass Judigan was dismounting. Long, ropy muscles writhed under Billy's white skin, and Judigan spat when he bared his own torso to the setting sun. "I'm going to raise yore hair, Billy boy!" he taunted, and drew a long heavy knife from a scabbard at the back of his beaded belt.

CHAPTER IV

Buffalo Billy Leads an Attack



BUFFALO BILLY threw his flat beaver aside and plucked his knife from its scabbard. He gripped it firmly and held the blade for an upthrust. No one but an experienced fighter would hold a knife just so, and the Indians leaned forward to watch.

Crass Judigan waited for no signal. He leaped high in the air and hurled his tall lean body at the young hunter, swinging his knife in a savage arc just as his boots touched the parched ground.

A low grunt of approval went up from the Indians when Buffalo Billy dropped to one knee instead of trying to step away from the gleaming knife. The blade whistled over his head, and Billy slashed with his own blade to draw first blood from Judigan's left shoulder.

Crass Judigan whirled like a cat and held the heel of his left hand out to ward Buffalo Billy away. Billy gave with the push and twisted like an eel. Then he stamped his left moccasin and whipped around so fast that his white, gleaming body made only a blur in the red light of the dying sun.

Buffalo Billy's right arm drove up at the end of his spin, and the hilt of his long knife thudded against Crass Judigan's left breast. Even as the handle met flesh, Buffalo Billy was leaping back. Judigan's thirsty blade met no resistance as it cut through the chill air of twilight.

Buffalo Billy landed lightly on the balls of his feet with his dripping knife ready to meet any attack. But Crass Judigan was dead on his feet, and he sprawled forward on his face when his severed heart sent its final message to the rustler's brain.

The white men sighed with relief, but no sound came from the stunned Indians. They waited in silence until Crass Judigan's boots had stopped rattling. Then the old sub-chief spoke quietly.

"You countum coup, young white chief?"

"White men don't take scalps," Buffalo Billy answered soberly. "White man who talks with forked tongue gone to the Happy Hunting Ground."

The old chief raised his rifle and shot Crass Judigan's spotted horse. Judigan would need a ghost horse to ride into the land of the Great Spirit.

Buffalo Billy drove his knife into the earth to clean the crimson blade. After replacing it in his scabbard, he pulled on his hunting shirt, mounted his horse, and saluted the setting sun with his right hand.

"Me Chief Crazy Horse," the old Indian said gravely. "White men steal Injun land; kill many buffalo. Comanche no like white man."

Buffalo Billy squared his shoulders and pointed at the body of Crass Judigan with his chin.

"Mebbe so Crazy Hoss want fight," he suggested quietly, but there was a deep hum in his voice.

"Crazy Horse want fight," the old chief repeated tonelessly, and then his hands began to move rapidly in the sign language.

Buffalo Billy watched intently, and while he watched, a little ridge of muscle bulged through his tanned skin to make a stubborn frame around his fighting mouth. Chief Crazy Horse was telling him that a white man had marked him, Buffalo Billy Bates, for his own gun. That man's name was—"Lefty" Fargo!

Chief Crazy Horse continued talking in the sign language. The young hunter knew that the Texans were watching him, knew that they would read the smoldering anger in his eyes if he turned his head.

According to Crazy Horse, the Texans had stolen large herds of cat-

tle and horses from Fargo, and had driven him from his grazing lands. Now the white men had brought war to the Indians in the Nations.

BILLY BATES shook his head and grunted softly. The Indians watched intently as he made his answer, reminding old Crazy Horse that the fight between Crass Judigan and himself had decided the issue between them. The Indians would keep their promise until the white men had joined the trail herd. After that, the truce would be ended.

"I will meet your white chief," Buffalo Billy said quietly, speaking in the Comanche tongue. "Tell him we will fight with the thunder-stick." And he touched the six-shooter in his skin holster.

Wheeling his horse abruptly, Buffalo Billy spoke to the Double T men and pointed with his chin to the dust cloud far to the east.

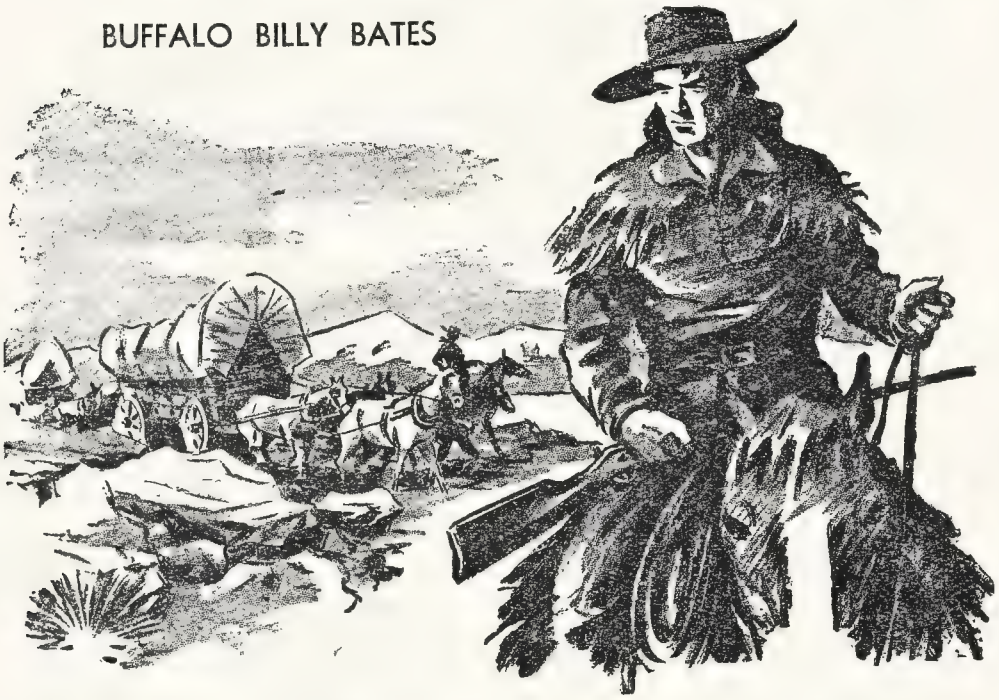
"Let's get back and help the boys bed down the herd. They've stopped runnin', and dark will be on us by the time we reach camp."

Thack Tipton eyed the Indians suspiciously, but he followed his young trail boss and rode alongside. The old Texan tried to read what was going on behind Buffalo Billy's smoldering eyes, but Billy Bates kicked his horse into a lope and remained silent until they were well out of rifle range.

"It means war, Tipton," he said quietly then. "The Indians will bring us fight, and they usually attack jest before daybreak."

"Whyn't yuh say so back yonder?" Bull Barton growled. "We coulda finished that band of braves to cut down the odds. When a redskin paints for the war-path, he ain't a good Injun until he is dead all over!"

"We made a promise," Buffalo Billy answered sternly. "I never lie to a white man, much less to a redskin. Anyhow, I have a better plan. Cunnel Cody used to say that when yuh know



yuh have to fight, take it to the enemy before he can get organized."

Limpy Johnson had his trench fires going when the little band rode into camp. The weary cattle had been milled to stop the stampede, and the old wrangler had penned the horse band in a rope corral. Three herders were circling the herd while their companions rode in for supper. When the meal was over, Buffalo Billy called the Double T crew around him and explained his plans.

"There's sixteen of us, countin' Limpy Johnson," he began quietly. "Three men stays with Limpy to guard the herd. That leaves twelve of us to make war on them Comanches, and every man will rope out a fresh hoss."

"Yuh mean we're going to attack that war-party?" Bull Barton asked eagerly.

Buffalo Billy nodded. "The redskins always steal or stampede the hosses first," he explained. "That's my job, and the rest of you boys will get all the fight yuh want for one time. Let's get goin' before the moon climbs high."

Every man was armed with six-gun and rifle when Buffalo Billy took the lead and rode west toward the Cimarron. The horses loped steadily for an hour across the grassy prairie, and Billy Bates halted his little party in a deep wallow when the lights from campfires flickered against the distant sky.

"I go alone from here," he stated quietly. "Leave one man here to watch the hosses, and the rest of yuh take it on foot. Keep behind cover until yuh get close to that Injun camp, and start the fight when yuh hear me give the old Rebel yell."

Buffalo Billy was riding his bay horse with a war-bridle looped around the animal's lower jaw. He had left his heavy rifle in the chuckwagon, but he held his choke-berry hunting bow in his right hand. He was obeying Buffalo Bill Cody, who had taught the young scout to fight the Indians with their own weapons, insisting that the best defense was a sudden, surprising offense.

BUFFALO BILLY rode out of the deep wallow and was swallowed in the darkness. He had the Indian's uncanny sense of direction, and he headed for a little knoll well beyond the light of a roaring campfire. A keen-eyed sentry should be posted on the highest point, and Billy Bates grunted softly when he saw a man's head outlined briefly against the western sky-line.

He slid to the ground and tied his horse to a springy willow near the bank of a small creek. His moccasined feet made no sound as he crouched low and crept toward the knoll, keeping behind sagebrush and grassy hummocks. He flattened out on his lean belly when a horse coughed softly, and Buffalo Billy knew that the lone Indian sentry was guarding the horse band.

Only the stamping of unshod hoofs disturbed the still night air as the young scout keened his hearing to place the Indian guard. The success of his surprise attack depended upon stampeding the horses. An arrow was notched to his bow-string when Buffalo Billy picked up a twisted root with his left hand.

The young scout drew back his left arm and tossed the root into a clump of mesquite. A dark figure rose up swiftly, and a bow-string twanged when the Indian sent an arrow into the bush.

The Indian showed only for a second, but that tick of time meant the difference between life and death.

Buffalo Billy's right arm drew back, and his fingers released the taut string. His steel-tipped arrow sped true to its mark. The shadowy sentry grunted softly. Several horses snorted when the Indian thudded to the ground and drummed his moccasined heels, but Billy Bates was back-tracking to the

thicket where he had left his swift bay mustang.

He made a soft clucking sound when he approached his horse, and then he was mounted, with his knees tucked under the rawhide rope fastened beneath the bay's belly. Five minutes later he was back on the knoll where he circled around to the west of the grazing Indian horses.

Buffalo Billy could see the unsuspecting Indians seated on their blankets around the campfire, nearly a quarter of a mile away. A blood-curdling yell pealed from his lips as Billy charged at the horse band. Then he drew his six-shooter and triggered three shots into the air above the stampeding Indian ponies.

A hundred head of horses snorted with terror and raced toward the Indian camp. Startled braves leaped to their feet. Rifles began to blaze from the mouth of a buffalo wallow when the Texans started their fight.

Taken completely by surprise and beaten at their own game, the painted warriors threw their rifles aside and retreated in panic away from the firelight. The Texas cowboys pursued them relentlessly, and their Henry rifles roared like thunder.

Buffalo Billy slowed his horse when the Indian ponies had stampeded through the camp. He could hear their drumming hoofs far in the distance when he slid from his bay and held his ear to the ground.

Buffalo Billy threw himself flat when a bow-string whined in front of him, and he heard the whir of an arrow speeding over his head. He pushed up and hurled his lean body forward as a shadowy form sprang erect from behind a clump of buck-brush. His arms locked around a muscular naked body.

LOCKING a heel behind his enemy's legs, Buffalo Billy threw his weight forward and down. A knife ripped the sleeve of his hunting shirt just before he landed on top of his struggling foe. There was no time to reach for his own knife, and Billy Bates was fighting for his life.

He rolled like a cat and came to his feet facing the silent Indian. The moon slid from behind a cloud, and Buffalo Billy leaped forward as he recognized the wrinkle-lined face of old Chief Crazy Horse.

Crazy Horse was coming to his feet with his knife gripped for an upthrust. One blow would disembowel a man, and the young Indian scout came apart like a wild bucking horse. The heel of his left hand turned the Indian's naked blade aside, and Buffalo Billy crashed a swinging right fist to the old chief's unprotected jaw.

Crazy Horse grunted and went to the ground like an axed steer. He was an old man, but a brave one. He alone had remained to fight when the young warriors had fled in panic.

Buffalo Billy picked up the long-bladed knife and stuck it in the ground near the unconscious chief. Then he mounted his horse and rode away in the darkness. There would be no daybreak attack on the Double T herd, and the defeated Indians could bury their own dead.

CHAPTER V

Crazy Horse Pays a Debt

HAVING made fair time, the Double T trail herd was within a day's drive of the Arkansas River. Wichita was only seventy miles to the northeast, and the cattle would reach market in prime condition. Two weeks had passed since the fight with the Comanches, and Buffalo Billy had grazed the herd slowly to put on flesh lost in the stampede.

Old Limpy Johnson roused up the sleeping crew by beating on his wreck-pan with a big spoon. The cowboys

were eating breakfast, and all eyes turned to Buffalo Billy when the young trail boss laid his tin plate aside and walked over to mount his pinto horse.

"Look yonderly, Boss," Bull Barton said to Thack Tipton. "Three Indians comin' thisaway, and Billy means to head 'em off!"

"Stand hitched," Thack Tipton barked. "That's old Chief Crazy Horse, and he's makin' the peace sign!"

Buffalo Billy rode across the plains with the sun at his back. He stopped his paint horse and made the sign of peace. The old Comanche chief dismounted, fumbled for his stone pipe, and filled the bowl with tobacco and willow bark. When the pipe was going, he took a deep draw and passed the pipe to Billy Bates.

"Heap brave warrior, Long-hair," he said in the Comanche tongue. "You give Crazy Horse back his life. Mebbe so I give you your life."

"My red brother speaks with the single tongue," Buffalo Billy answered gravely. "I will listen."

"Comanche need beef," the old chief said sadly. "We catch only a few horses, and we did not get our toll. You pay toll, Chief Long-hair?"

"Twenty fat steers," Buffalo Billy answered without hesitation, then leaned forward to study the old chief's thin face. "Where is Lefty Fargo?" he asked softly.

"He waits near the river with many braves," Crazy Horse muttered, and his black eyes smoldered. "Bad white chief bring plenty fire-water. Shoot-um white men in back and steal herd. You give Crazy Horse his life. I pay debt!"

Buffalo Billy straightened up and threw back his wide shoulders. His long brown hair glistened in the early morning sun, and the fingers of his right hand touched the six-shooter in his skin holster.

"I sent one message to Lefty Fargo," he said softly, and waited until Crazy Horse met his steady glance. "The white men do not want war with their red brothers. Ride to the river and tell Fargo I will meet him at sundown. Leave your two braves to help me drive my cattle and we will meet you at the river."

Chief Crazy Horse spoke to his companions and mounted his pony. Buffalo Billy rode back to the Double T camp with the two Comanche braves, and he went directly to old Thack Tipton.

"I leave yuh here, Tipton," he began slowly. "I'll cut out my share of the beef, and these two redskins will help me drive 'em to Fort Dodge."

Thack Tipton nodded and made no attempt to argue. Buffalo Billy was to get ten percent of the herd for leading them safely to the Arkansas, and the young hunter had carried out his part of the bargain.

"Cut out a hundred and eighty head, Billy," he agreed quietly. "Take a few more head to pay toll to the Comanches, and keep yore eyes skinned for Lefty Fargo."

BUFFALO BILLY knew that the old cattleman suspected something, but he offered no explanations. He made a count on his tally string as the crew cut out the bunch of beef he would drive away. After that, he shook hands with the tough cowboys and quit the camp with his head held high.

The fat steers were rested after a night on bed ground with good grass, and they increased the pace when they smelled water late in the afternoon. Tall willows rose from the high cut-banks of the Arkansas River, and several mounted Indians rode out to meet the running herd.

Buffalo Billy dropped back and waited for old Chief Crazy Horse to bring him the news. The young braves surrounded the herd and drove the cattle through an opening in the high bank. Chief Crazy Horse came close and spoke in soft gutturals.

"The white chief waits for you,

Long-hair. He has two thunder-sticks. You have only one."

"Lightning does not strike twice in the same place," Buffalo Billy answered soberly. "I only need one thunder-stick, but I do not trust Lefty Fargo."

"You trust Crazy Horse," the old Indian answered, and his black eyes flashed. "We ride through the pass, and you leave your horse. The white chief waits in the shadow. We take twenty steers."

He handed Billy a notched arrow for a receipt. Buffalo Billy gravely took the arrow and verified the tally. Then he handed the arrow back to the puzzled Indian.

"I will give you and your braves sixty more steers if you will help me drive the rest to Fort Dodge, Chief Crazy Horse," he offered quietly. "I agreed to deliver a hundred steers to Cunnel Sparks, and the rest are yours."

A frown of doubt showed briefly on the old chief's wrinkled face. He shook his head slowly as he stared at the notched arrow in his left hand.

"Mebbe so Long-hair go to Happy Hunting Ground," he muttered.

Buffalo Billy smiled and held out his right hand. That big brown hand was steady and without trouble. He drew his Colt six-shooter and put the hammer on half-cock. Then he spun the cylinder to check the loads, and snugged the heavy weapon down in his skin holster.

"You hold that arrow high for a signal," he said quietly. "Lefty Fargo and I will make our fight when you drop the shaft. If he wins, all the cattle are yours."

Chief Crazy Horse smiled and offered his right hand. No more words were necessary, and there would be much beef for the Comanches during the long winter. The white men would fight like warriors, and the Great Spirit alone could pick the winner.

The old Indian chief nudged his horse with a heel and rode through the break in the high cut-bank. Buffalo Billy followed a few paces behind, and he slid from his horse when he saw a tall, powerful man waiting in the shadows by the river bed.

Lefty Fargo measured four inches above six feet, and his weight would be around two hundred pounds. His dark skin suggested a taint of Indian blood, but he wore the buckskin clothing of the white plainsman. Two heavy six-shooters were tied low on his long, sinewy legs, and the hands above them did not tremble.

"So yuh're Buffalo Billy Bates," he said softly, and smiled with his keen dark eyes. "Yuh brought me fight, and Lefty Fargo never had enough fight in all his life. After yuh stop kickin', I mean to square up with old Thack Tipton, and that hulkin' Bull Barton!"

"Too much talk," Buffalo Billy grunted, and shrugged his wide shoulders. "Now you listen while Chief Crazy Hoss makes medicine."

THE cattle were in the river, and the Indian braves were watching the two white men intently. Neither showed the slightest sign of fear, and they did not take their eyes from each other when Crazy Horse spoke briefly.

"Watchum arrow," the old chief said sharply. "When arrow fall to ground, white men make lightning with thunder-sticks. White men no cheat, or my braves kill!"

Lefty Fargo scowled and glanced at the Comanche braves. Ten rifles were pointed at him; ten more covered the young Indian scout. For once in his checkered life, the white renegade would have to make an honest fight.

Buffalo Billy spread his feet and studied his tall, scowling enemy. He knew that Fargo was left-handed, and then he saw that the rustler wore his right gun with the handle reversed. That meant that he would use his left hand for a cross draw. Buffalo Billy narrowed his tawny eyes.

Chief Crazy Horse stood between the two men, and off to one side. They

could see him without removing their eyes from each other. Lefty Fargo tensed when the old Indian raised the notched arrow in his right hand.

The steel-pointed shaft pointed at the ground, and hung poised for flight. Without warning, Crazy Horse opened his fingers like a hunter releasing a taut bow-string. The red sun caught the steel shaft when it left the higher shadows, and two hands snatched for their death-laden holsters.

Lefty Fargo reached across his lean belly with his left hand, and his long fingers curled around the reversed butt of his gun. He had moved like the whipping strike of a sidewinder, but that cross-draw had consumed a precious fragment of time.

Buffalo Billy dropped his right hand straight down to his skin holster. That slapping hand leaped up again without pause. Lightning tipped the muzzle of the long black barrel just as it cleared leather, and Buffalo Billy leaned against the bucking recoil to drive his roaring shot into the treacherous heart of his enemy.

Lefty Fargo triggered a shot into the ground between his long boots when the heavy slug thudded between his ribs. The six-shooter dropped from his nerveless hand, and he plunged across it to smother the black powdersmoke that curled up to make a ring around his black head.

The notched arrow was still quivering in the ground when Buffalo Billy turned to old Chief Crazy Horse. He pouched his six-shooter with a sigh, turned his back, and pointed to the fat steers in the sluggish river.

"I brought the Double T herd through, and we'll deliver my beef at Fort Dodge," he told the old chief. "I took on a job of work, and those steers are what you might call—Buffalo Billy's reward!"

COMING IN THE NEXT ISSUE

BUFFALO BILLY MAKES MEDICINE

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By SCOTT CARLETON

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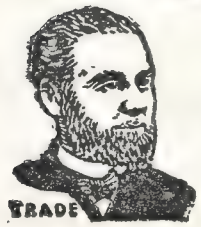

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Boot Hill Client

By WILLIAM MAHONEY

Author of "Six-Gun Harvest," "Hands Up," etc.

With an oath, Toad Bondell went for his six-gun

THE office door opened and spurred boots trod on the wooden flooring. Blackie Adams, slouched deep in a swivel chair, yawned but didn't open his eyes.

"Howdy."

The visitor's voice was pleasant. Drowsily, Blackie tried placing its owner.

"Mister Blackstone Adams?"

Blackie sighed resignedly. Mister Blackstone Adams! Hell's-bells, the hombre was a total stranger to Skull Bend.

Cowtown Lawyer Adams Finds His Own Way of Trying a Sidewinding Killer's Case!

"That's me," said Blackie, opening slate-gray eyes. He saw a tall blond cowboy. A handsome, broad-shouldered chap, lean of waist and hip. Cobalt eyes were sizing up Blackie gravely.

"Mort Hayden is my handle," said the waddy, "an' I'm needin' a lawyer."

Blackie waved the cowboy into a chair, carefully flicked a dust particle from his sleeve.

"You've come to Pima County's leading attorney-at-law. What is your tight?" he said.

"I'm figgerin' to kill a hombre."

Blackie blinked. "Most unusual, most unusual. Can it be that you're trying to—"

"Pull yore laig? Absolutely not."

Blackie believed him. Mort Hayden's face was as devoid of humor as a hunk of lava.

"Who is the intended *corpus?*"

"One Toad Bondell."

Blackie's lips pursed. Toad Bondell was a recent comer to Skull Bend, a tinhorn and gun-bully by repute. A born trouble-maker, Marshal Ora Carson had opined, when Bondell blew into town and took up headquarters at the Lone Owl Saloon.

"What's your score against this Toad Bondell?"

"Plenty," said Mort Hayden, grimly. "He killed my brother, Fred, back Yuma way. A year ago, come grass."

"Murder?"

"Shore, but the law said no. Toad Bondell had cheated Fred outa five hundred dollars at head-to-head stud, when he saw Fred was gettin' wise. So Toad started an argument. Red-eye cocky, Fred was suckered into goin' for his hardware. Toad dropped him easy, an' claimed self-defense. He got off scot, he did—but had to high-tail pronto. I've been cuttin' his sign ever since."

BLACKIE eyed his visitor shrewdly. "Bondell is rated Colt-slick. But that doesn't seem to worry you."

"It don't." Finality rang clear and defiant in the waddy's voice.

Blackie was impelled to put a question that had pressed his tongue since Mort Hayden first stated the purpose of his visit.

"Why do you need a lawyer? Helping to Boot Hill a sidewinder like Toad Bondell doesn't exactly come under the heading of legal business."

Mort Hayden grinned bleakly. "It happens I'm in parts unknown. But this Toad hombre will have friends, drygulchin' pals. Savvy? Besides, even fair-minded folks sometimes go loco an' reach for hemp when a killin' happens, no matter who is in the wrong."

Blackie nodded. "Under the circumstances, I reckon you're wise in engaging legal representation to protect your rights aforehand."

"My neck, yuh mean. Wa-al, are yuh hired?"

"I am," quickly replied Blackie. "Now—uh—there's the small matter of a retaining fee."

"Gotcha. Here's ten dollars. Yuh get forty more, all I have, when I leave town without a hemp collar."

"And if you don't leave at all?"

"The forty will bury me plumb decent."

"So it will," agreed Blackie, thoughtfully, and reached for his John B. "Let's drink on that bargain. I'm buying."

It was late afternoon and Skull Bend, hours dormant under a fiery Arizona sun, was beginning to perk with ordinary pursuits. Blackie discreetly tried steering his new-found client into the Ranchmen's Saloon. But Mort Hayden insisted on visiting the Lone Owl, hangout of Toad Bondell.

"I'm a man," he told Blackie significantly, "that ain't ag'in mixin' business with pleasure."

Reluctantly, Blackie ushered his client into the Lone Owl. Patrons were few, supper hour being at hand, and Toad Bondell was conspicuously absent.

Fat Leo Sutter, the head bartender, greeted them with:

"Yore hardware, gents—then name yore pizen."

Blackie was unarmed. Mort Hayden frowned his hesitancy until Blackie grinned and said:

"It's a custom hereabouts not to shoot an unarmed hombre."

Hayden handed over his gun. Fat Leo gave the weapon to his swamper, a bony little man with a bald, gnome-like head and buttonish black eyes. Blackie watched the swamper unlock the gun-check room off the bar end, then grinned at Fat Leo.

"Peculiar looking codger. Had him long?"

"Two weeks," said Fat Leo. "Not much on the handsome side, is Porgy Nesser, but he's plumb smart with brass rail an' spittoon."

Blackie downed his red-eye. "Hayden, it's chow time."

"I ain't hungry—for food," Hayden said.

"I've always found trouble tough on an empty stomach. Mind if I fill mine?"

Hayden didn't, and Blackie left, heading for Pancho Miguel's beanery upstreet. There, he ordered a beef steak rare, with trimmings, and thought most benevolently of his new client. But, with the steak half gone, his appetite suddenly fled.

Intuition had flashed a warning. He made a feeble attempt to ignore the premonition. But it proved too strong. He rose, paid for his half-eaten meal, and hurried back to the Lone Owl.

AS HE parted the Lone Owl's batwings, Blackie knew his hunch had been true. For midway down the bar, facing each other at arm's length, stood Toad Bondell and Mort Hayden. Bondell was armed. Hayden's holster was still empty.

"Yuh've bad-mouthed me overmuch, stranger," Toad Bondell was saying in cold fury. "Send for yore shootin' iron. Yore brother was a red-eye guzzlin' liar. That goes double for yuh."

Mort Hayden eyed Bondell like he would a cornered diamondback. He spoke softly to Fat Leo. The bartender nervously signaled Porgy Nesser. The saloon swamper bobbed his gnomelike bald head, vanished into the gun-check room. Fat Leo said:

"No shootin' in here, boys. Makes a helluva mess."

"Don't worry, Leo," Bondell blustered. "I'm figgerin' tuh make this sidewinder eat street dust."

At that instant, the little swamper reappeared with Hayden's gun, a single action Colt .44. Hayden reached for the gun, only to freeze as Bondell snarled:

"Hold it! I ain't takin' a chanct of gettin' murdered. Porgy, yuh drop that iron into his leather—an' easy like."

Hayden's face flushed under the whiplash of hot anger.

"They who live by the gun," he said coldly, through set teeth, "are always 'fraid of the gun—in another hombre's hand. Howsomever, I'm checkin' my gun 'fore I put daylight through the skunk what murdered my brother."

The veins in Bondell's thick neck corded. Thin lips parting curtainwise from yellowed teeth, he snapped:

"Touch that gun an' yuh're buzzard meal! Porgy, check his smoke-wagon."

Porgy nervously began checking the gun, Mort Hayden watching closely. The swamper removed the cartridges, thumbed the hammer. Hayden decided to change shells. He gave Porgy five from his belt. The little swamper had difficulty getting them into the cylinder because of an apparently injured, adhesive-taped right thumb. Reloaded, Porgy's shaky hand slid the gun into Hayden's holster.

An evil grin wreathing his thin lips, Bondell backed from the saloon. Hayden followed, cobalt eyes narrow and a deadly confidence in bearing that reassured the watching Blackie.

Outside, the street was deserted. But Blackie knew that eyes were peering intently from windows and cracked doors. He took up a position just inside the saloon batwings, from which vantage point he could see the gun-fight scene clearly.

In the center of the dusty, deeply

rutted street, Hayden and Bondell still faced each other. But now they were backing slowly in opposite directions. Twenty to twenty-five paces—and then guns would flame roaringly.

Blackie's attention was abruptly distracted by movement beside him. Porgy Nesser, his wizened face working with excitement, had his nose glued to a grimy window. A bucket of water rested at the swamper's feet. His bony hands clutched a bottle of arnica and a roll of soiled bandage, likely filched from some wandering sawbone's surgical kit. Porgy, evidently, was prepared to care for the wounded.

Blackie returned his gaze to the street. He had an idea that the swamper's thoughtfulness would prove futile. Death and not a nursing bed would be the reward of the loser of the shooting fray.

Then, in a twinkling, it happened. To Blackie's sharp eye Hayden shaded Bondell on the draw. Six-guns crashed.

BLACKIE'S heart somersaulted. Hayden's shot had gone wild. The cowboy was wilting, gun hand limp. With a laugh like a hyena's bark, Bondell fired again. Hayden spun about, then plunged on his face, a small cloud of dust his shroud.

Blackie rushed from the saloon. But Porgy Nesser was before him, with water bucket, arnica and bandage. The little swamper's feet betrayed him as he reached the fallen cowboy. He stumbled, the pail overturning and drenching the prone figure.

Blackie pushed the swamper aside, knelt and turned Hayden over gently, only to find death had been before him. An excited crowd was gathering. Blackie's ears told him the killing was extremely unpopular. Someone yelled for Marshal Ora Carson. That individual quickly appeared, fresh from supper table, a napkin still tucked in his collar.

"Yore gun," he growled at Toad Bondell. The latter surlily complied, then rasped truculently:

"I claim self-defense, Carson. Got witnesses a-plenty."

Carson's square, saddle-hued face was hard.

"As coroner, I'll have to jury that plea. Yuh'd better stick close meanwhile."

Bondell grimaced disgust with formalities but said nothing. He was shrewd enough not to try the temper of the townsfolk too far, especially when he was quite certain he would be cleared of any onus in the shooting scrape—cleared legally. Blackie, eyeing the killer of his client balefully, was as certain. Bitterly certain.

Marshal Carson examined the corpse, retrieved the dead waddy's gun from a rapidly vanishing puddle of water made by the overturning of the swamper's bucket. One shot had been fired. As the marshal took a small roll of paper currency from a trouser pocket of the corpse, Blackie said:

"There's forty dollars in that roll, Carson. I was his attorney and I'll act as executor of his estate, if you're willing. I promise that the town'll not have to bury him."

Carson agreeable, Blackie took charge of the meager effects of the slain puncher. The body was hurried to a vacant storeroom, there to await morning burial in the more select sector of the local Boot Hill, thanks to forty dollars. Marshal Carson quickly selected a jury of six. He then herded them, Toad Bondell, and a dozen reluctant witnesses into the Lone Owl.

In the saloon, Blackie listened to several of the witnesses. They plainly bore little good-will toward Bondell, yet their stories bolstered the killer's plea of self-defense. Hayden, they said, had issued the challenge. He also had gone for his gun first.

Disgusted, Blackie wandered into the gun-check room. He looked around carefully, yet uncertain as to what he expected to find. There were no guns

on the shelves. Nothing in sight but a chair and a table. The lone window was screened. Idly, Blackie tested the screen. It appeared hooked from inside—yet swung outward at his touch!

Examination showed that the staple holding the hook had been cunningly sheared through at the wood.

Blackie began a swift but thorough search of the room. His efforts brought no fruit. He pushed the window screen outward, peered into a narrow areaway between the saloon and a smithy next door. Footprints were fresh in the soft turf below the window. Footprints and something else. He climbed out the window.

His find proved a six-inch piece of tin tubing, similar to a portion of a button's pea-blower. Underslung near one end was a tiny pot, cotton packed. The cotton was damp with kerosene. Blackie stared blankly. A toy blowtorch! Then, suddenly, his face hardened. He carefully replaced his find and climbed back through the window.

MARSHAL CARSON had completed his cursory inquest. Seth Brown, lanky hard-rock miner, the foreman of the coroner's jury, solemnly delivered the verdict while cutting himself a chaw of tobacco.

"We, the jury, does find the killin' of this here stranger, named Mort Hayden, hailin' from down Yuma way, a matter of justifiable homicide by one Toad Bondell of this here community."

The saloon crowd accepted the verdict in silence. Marshal Carson's eloquent shrug bespoke general opinion. Blackie looked for Toad Bondell. That worthy was already leaving the saloon, flanked by cronies. From Bondell's harsh laughter, Blackie guessed that he was hugely enjoying compliments on getting a clean bill of health.

Marshal Carson's humor was none too sweet as Blackie approached him.

"These killin's, justifiable or not, has got to stop," stated Carson savagely. "They're ruinin' Skull Bend's reputation."

Blackie said quietly: "Murders are especially bad for Skull Bend's reputation."

The lawyer was instantly the cynosure of eyes. Marshal Carson stared a cold question. Blackie elaborated:

"This evening has seen justice boldly raped in the Lone Owl—and a foul murder gone unpunished."

Comment buzzed angrily. Carson hushed it with a wave of hand, then spoke curtly.

"Yuh mouth strong words, Blackie. Back yore hand—or shut up. Due process of law has found that Toad Bondell shot in self-defense. Of course, if yuh've evidence to the contrary—"

Blackie's lips twisted wryly. He had no evidence that would stand up in court. Yet he was morally certain that Mort Hayden had been murdered. He could even make a shrewd guess as to how the crime had been accomplished. But—

"Speak up, Blackie!" snapped Carson. "Else folks'll think yuh're badmouthin' outa pure spleen."

Blackie's face went grim. "I've spoke my piece. I stand on this—Toad Bondell is a murderer. He killed Mort Hayden by foul means."

"Yuh're askin' trouble," said Carson harshly. "Toad Bondell isn't here to defend himself. I ain't holdin' no brief for him, mind yuh, but he's been duly held innocent in the eyes of the law."

Angry, gibing remarks from the crowd affirmed the marshal's stand. Blackie ignored them. He calmly draped the late Mort Hayden's gunbelt across an arm and elbowed his way doorward. Across his shoulder he sent a parting shot.

"Toad Bondell murdered Hayden—and I'm hoping he doesn't like the accusation."

Marshal Carson ripped something about damned fools. From others came sarcastic sallies and raucous

laughter. Blackie smiled bleakly into the evening dusk now blanketing the town, and went to his office. In living quarters adjacent, he flung himself on a cot. He lay there, thinking hard, until dusk had merged into night.

At nine p. m. came a knock at his door. He lighted a kerosene lamp. His caller was Marshal Carson, plainly worried.

"Blackie, yuh've shot yore mouth off once too often. Toad Bondell is gunnin' for yuh. Yuh can't call a man a murderer an' not risk eatin' lead. Better leave town till he cools off, or high-tails of his own accord."

Blackie grinned. "I'm not running, Carson. I'm no gunslick but I figure to hold my own any day with a Toad Bondell."

"Yuh're a fool!"

"Mort Hayden beat Bondell to the draw, handsome."

Carson stared. "Yuh really believe that?"

"Saw it with my own eyes."

CARSON studied. "Nope, I'm not goin' to have another shootin' scrape. Got my duty to perform. I'm jailin' yuh for safe keepin'."

Blackie grinned coldly. He felt of seven dollar bills in his trouser pocket, the remainder of the ten-dollar retaining fee given him by Mort Hayden. He hadn't earned that money yet. His eyes glowed strangely as Carson rose.

"Get yore hat, Blackie, 'cause yuh're jail-bound. Come on," he said.

Blackie came—but unexpectedly. He literally dived from his cot seat, tackling the lawman about the midriff. Carson crashed floorward, winded. The next instant, he was disarmed. Sixty seconds more and he was securely trussed hand and foot with bed sheeting. Blackie stuffed most of a pillow case between the lawman's teeth.

"No jail for me, Carson. At least, not this night." He chuckled as Carson glowered a thousand invectives.

Then, ignoring the lawman, Blackie got out Mort Hayden's six-gun, unloaded it. It was a single-action Colt .44. He owned a similar weapon. He thumbed the hammer several times. The gun worked neatly, felt homey to his hand. He buckled on Hayden's gun-belt, filled the Colt with fresh cartridges. For the next half hour, he practiced his draw. As the old feel crept back into his gun hand, he knew grim satisfaction.

Gun-fighting with a strange weapon is risky, foolhardy. But Blackie wanted Hayden's gun to cut down the cowboy's murderer.

It'd be what they called poetic justice, reflected Blackie, as he put on his Stetson, turned out the kerosene lamp and headed for the street with a cheery good-by to his captive marshal.

The night was warm and moonbright, the canopy of skies overhead sparkling with myriads of stars. A beautiful night, thought Blackie ruefully, to go strolling with Death.

Blackie didn't go directly to the Lone Owl. Instead, he skirted the rear of the buildings lining the saloon's side of Skull Bend's main and only street, finally turning into the narrow areaway between the Lone Owl and adjacent smithy.

He moved with stealthy step to the window of the gun-check room, paused and felt of the turf underfoot. His searching hands failed to find the tiny home-made blow-torch he had discovered lying there earlier. He straightened and moved boldly to the street and into the saloon.

His entrance caused a stir. The babble of harsh voices ebbed sharply. No one spoke to him as he moved to the bar and ordered a drink. Fat Leo served him, sober-faced.

"Yuh got a gun, Blackie?"

Blackie handed over the Colt. Fat Leo recognized it with a wry grimace. Porgy Nesser came shuffling, took the gun and went into the check room. Blackie saw him come out, lock the door. The little swamper moped about

for a few minutes, then went out the back door of the saloon.

Blackie smiled broadly into the back mirror. Fat Leo, watching, scowled his perplexity. Blackie had another drink. The saloon crowd was thinning. Trouble was brewing. Fat Leo's scowl deepened. This damn gun-fighting was rough on business.

A half hour later Blackie's alert eyes discovered the return of Porgy Nesser. Harbinger of death, thought Blackie, as he eyed the grotesque form of the swamper. He was right. Shortly, a thick silence blanketed the place. A harsh voice said:

"So I'm a murderer, huh?"

Blackie turned slowly to look into the broad, flat face of Toad Bondell. Venom glowed wickedly in the man's eyes. Blackie grinned.

"You are a murderer, Bondell—and of the foulest type."

Bondell ran a thick tongue over thin lips. Kill-lust was written on his features. Yet he dared not shoot down this unarmed taunter.

"Go get yore gun, yuh scum!" he said hoarsely. "Go send for it, pronto—'less yuh wanta get down on yore knees an' beg my pardon."

BLACKIE'S smile held. He turned his back contemptuously to Bondell and signaled Porgy Nesser. The swamper moved with alacrity toward the gun-check room. A moment later he came hurrying with the weapon.

"Check it for the jasper," warned Bondell, hand hovering close to the butt of his holstered six-gun. "I'm plumb set ag'in takin' a chanct with sidewinders."

Blackie made no protest, to the wonderment of onlookers. He watched Porgy Nesser check the gun. The swamper was rather clumsy about it, evidently because of his taped right thumb and stress of the circumstances. He finally got Blackie's approval and slipped it into the waiting holster.

"Ten paces—an' any time yuh're ready!" snarled Bondell.

"Outside!" shouted Fat Leo. "For Pete's sake, boys—outside!"

"Ten paces—and I'm ready to perforate a coyote." Blackie spoke softly, his smile gone.

There was a wild scrambling for cover. Slowly the two men backed along the bar, away from each other, mouths tight and eyes hard. Eight paces, nine paces, ten. . . .

Young Jim Carbody Returns to the San Juan Mountain Country to Clean Up a Nest of Land-Grabbing Killers

IN

GUNS RULE THE RANGE

A Complete Novelet of Roaring Justice

By PHILIP KETCHUM

Coming in the Next Issue of **POPULAR WESTERN**

They stood still. A curious expression spread over the taut face of Toad Bondell. A look of uncertainty—and fear. His victim was waiting for him to draw first!

Blackie taunted him. "You are a murderer, aren't you, Bondell? A very cunning killer who takes no chances. You murdered Mort Hayden with the help of—"

WITH an oath, Toad Bondell went for his six-gun. Blackie's gun roared a split-second first and Bondell's bullet clipped a ceiling log. Bondell sagged as though belted hard in the middle. He tried to level his gun. Blackie coolly fired again. Bondell toppled to the floor, clutching at his chest. He squirmed convulsively a moment, then lay still. Toad Bondell was dead.

A clumping of boot-shod feet sounded, then Marshal Ora Carson came barging into the saloon with drawn gun. He came straight at Blackie, only to veer sharply and shout:

"Look out behind!"

Blackie whirled. Porgy Nesser, his wizened face satanic with hatred, was leveling a .30-.30 Winchester at him. Blackie's finger tightened about the trigger of his six-gun, then loosened. For a blast from Marshal Carson's gun flung the little swamper backwards to the floor, his face a bloody, shot-torn pulp.

"Thanks," said Blackie, "for killing an accessory to murder."

"Huh?"

Blackie grinned and went to the lifeless form of Porgy Nesser. A brief search unearthed the tiny blow-torch. Marshal Carson and others crowded to stare in open perplexity.

"Porgy Nesser used this to heat the hammer of Mort Hayden's six-gun," Blackie said. "He did that at Toad Bondell's orders. Probably was Bondell's lackey, for he showed up around here two weeks ago, the same time as Bondell. That hammer heating trick cost Hayden his life, for when his bare thumb struck the hammer of his single-action Colt—"

Blackie didn't finish. There was no need. There was a nervous feeling of thumbs in the crowd.

"A hellish business," Fat Leo said. "But Blackie—yuh used the same gun. Did that rat of a Porgy Nesser heat the hammer on yuh?"

Blackie smiled. "He did—but look."

He held his right thumb to view. Its face bore a strip of protective adhesive tape. The crowd laughed its appreciation.

Only Marshal Ora Carson looked sour.

"A fine night's work," he told Blackie grumpily, "but I'm not goin' to overlook yore manhandlin' of the law. Yuh're goin' to spend the rest of the night in the calaboose. Get goin', Blackie."

Blackie grinned slyly. "Is there red-eye in your calaboose? And a deck of cards?"

"Mebbe."

"Then I'll drink to your health—and beat you penniless at stud."

"Yuh can't," growled Carson as they moved from the saloon. "Not with a pillow slip in yore big mouth yuh can't!"

●

Complete Action Novelets by SCOTT CARLETON, PHILIP KETCHUM and TOM GUNN, Plus Many Other Exciting Western Stories by Popular Authors Coming in the Next Issue!

Death Hits Salinas

By EUGENE A. CLANCY

Author of "Bunkhouse Bandit," "The Trail of Hate," etc.

Toller's hands flashed to his belt, but they froze there as Bucklin drew his gun

Mace Bucklin Rides Into a Guntrap—and Shoots His Way Out Against Grim Odds!

MACE BUCKLIN stood looking at the riderless horse—and at the freshly dried blood on the saddle. The horse did not belong to the Slash K. Why should a strange horse come loping up to the Slash K? It was a mystery.

"Most every hoss what I ever knowed," said Andy Farson, Mace's foreman, scratching his seamed and leathery chin, "would hit back for where it belongs. This here business don't look good at all, Mace. Some-

thin' funny about this danged spread anyways, like I've been tellin' yuh right along since yuh bought it."

"Yuh gonna tell me yuh had a dream about a strange hoss comin' here?" asked the tall, lean, hawk-faced young owner of the Slash K, with a grin that was gone as quickly as it came. "Listen, Andy, this looks like a plant to me. Just who would be interested in sendin' this hoss here like this I don't know no more'n you do—but I aim to find out mighty pronto. Turn this here mystery hoss into the corral and hide that saddle somewheres. I'm ridin' to town."

Andy Farson shifted his chew and eyed his young boss with a gathering frown. A month ago Andy Farson, out of a job and devoting his time to absorbing red liquor, had gone to sleep on the floor of the Salinas Saloon—and woke up to find himself in the Slash K bunkhouse. This rather grim and taciturn young man, Mace Bucklin, new owner of the Slash K, had picked him off the floor, loaded him in a buckboard, and brought him home with him.

Mace Bucklin had appeared suddenly in these parts from nowhere and bought the small Slash K. Just why was still a puzzle to Andy, for as yet Mace Bucklin had made no move to gather a herd or hire an outfit. Andy, however, asked no questions, and the hawk-faced newcomer to Salinas Valley volunteered no information. He was away much of the time, leaving Andy and a Chinese cook to do as they pleased.

But Andy Farson stayed sober. He worked, doing what he could to get the tumble-down and long deserted Slash K into shape. He intended to show Mace Bucklin that the ranch owner had made no mistake in picking him off the saloon floor. There was something about this Mace Bucklin that got under a fellow's skin.

Andy stood watching him now as he climbed into the saddle. The coming of the strange, riderless horse with blood on its saddle was a most unusual event. Mace Bucklin took out his twin six-guns, and examined them carefully before thrusting them back into leather.

"Listen, Mace," Andy said, "if yuh're figgerin' yuh may be needin' them smokers, I reckon yuh'd best let me come along with yuh. Four guns is better than two."

"I want yuh to stay right here," Mace replied grimly. "I'm dependin' on yuh, Andy. Yuh may have a visitor, a tough little cuss. Kinda entertain him till I git back this afternoon. Just be mighty careful not to turn yore back to him."

Andy Farson blinked, but before he could open his lips, Mace had spurred his horse and was galloping off on the back-trail for Salinas.

THERE was a grim smile in Mace Bucklin's gray eyes as he rode through the rugged foothills that lay between the Slash K home range and the straggling cowtown. He knew that he had made no mistake about Andy Farson. Andy would know what to do, and would do it.

It had been early morning when the strange horse loped up to the Slash K. Mace and Andy were still in the kitchen, having flapjacks and coffee. The horse coming at that particular time had struck Mace as being odd.

"A gun-fight might happen most any time," he thought to himself as he sent the roan onto a steep, ascending trail, "but mostly they don't happen in the early mornin'. Ain't no trouble 'round here atall that I know of, and ain't nobody hardly atall in Salinas—and Salinas ain't awake in the early mornin'. Looks like this missin' feller was drygulched out on the trail, and not far from the Slash K, neither. But that don't git us nowheres—nor explain why his hoss should come to the Slash K. So I reckon this is it."

The galloping roan came out on a narrow plateau near the top of a lofty

foothill. Mace drew rein. Salinas, with its cluster of false-front buildings lay almost directly at his feet, in the wide basin made by converging foothills. The town seemed deserted. No sign of movement at all, nor could Mace spot even a lone rider out on the twisting ribbon of trail leading to the Border some ten miles south of Salinas.

Mace dug heels again. He nodded as a grim smile showed in his gray eyes and played about his firm lips.

"Yeah," he said to himself. "This here ain't no local matter. Hinkel and Baby-face has arrived. Only Hinkel would think up that there stunt of announcin' his presence by sendin' me a riderless hoss!"

The lean, lithe, hawk-faced young owner of the Slash K rode down to the uneven, rocky floor of the basin. He pulled down to an easier pace, and then rode into the north end of town at a walk. Entering the long main street, he loosened his heavy, bone-handled guns in their holsters.

He built himself a quirly, and touched a match to it. Outwardly, Mace Bucklin was relaxed, a rider ambling into town with no special business in mind. And Salinas, still asleep and all but deserted, seemed utterly peaceful.

But Mace Bucklin, his keen, wary eyes noting every mote of dust floating in the hot sunlight, knew that death lurked here in the apparently deserted and somnolent cowtown. Swift, treacherous death. It might flame from any doorway, from behind the upper part of any of those false-fronts.

And then it came. A six-gun bellowed, and a slug burned through the left side of Mace's shirt. He knew that death had missed him and it was only a scratch, but something told him the next slug would not miss, and he fairly lifted the roan into the alleyway he was passing. At the same time he leaped from the saddle and stood crouched against the side of the feed store that faced the corner. Both guns were in his hands, fingers coiled around triggers.

The shot had come from behind, from one of the buildings he just had passed, and he knew that it had come from high up, for the slug had ripped downward across his side.

Mace waited there, but no second shot came. He straightened up, holstering his left-hand gun. He knew there would be no second shot. Hinkel never repeated the same trick. He would try something else. Mace glanced at the roan. The well trained animal was standing there quietly. Mace stepped out into the main street. He kept a gun in his hand, but merely because he was taking no chances.

BUT now, brought by the sound of the shot, a handful of citizens were coming into the street, glancing up and down curiously. Shooting was a matter of course in Salinas at night, but not at this time of morning. They converged on Mace, and his eyes swept them keenly. Then he holstered the gun, felt his smarting side gingerly, and smiled.

"Some jasper musta mistook me for somebody else," he explained. "The drygulchin' skunk mighty nigh got me, too. Been some trouble in town?" His gaze searched their faces. There was no stranger amongst them. He knew them all—storekeepers, the grizzled Mex liveryman, a Chink from the restaurant. They knew him, too, but they were not returning his smile. Mace Bucklin was still the untried newcomer, the man who did not come into Salinas very often, who did not mingle. Now the group looked at him curiously, and he read the doubt in their eyes.

"Ain't had no trouble in a month of Sundays," said one of the men. Then, evidently voicing what was in their minds, he added, "Don't see how yuh could be mistook for somebody else, Bucklin. Mighty funny that a drygulcher is workin' right here in town.

Yuh shore yuh ain't havin' some kinda personal trouble?"

"Yeah, that there is jest the question I'd like to hear yuh answer, Bucklin!" boomed a harsh and grating new voice.

The group of townsmen parted, and Mace tensed as a big, hulking man with an ugly, bearded face and deep-set eyes pushed his way through the little crowd. There was a star pinned to his vest. It was Sheriff Seth Toller. Mace Bucklin turned, and as he looked into Seth Toller's deep-set, muddy eyes, something seemed to click in his brain, furnishing a warning of an unexpected angle to the sinister things that were happening this morning.

"What yuh mean by that, Sheriff?" he asked quietly.

"I'll tell yuh fast enough!" Seth Toller grated. "I was agoin' to ride out and have a talk with yuh this mornin'. Yuh ain't doin' any ranchin' out to that Slash K an' yuh ain't give any explanation of yoreself. Yuh don't talk to nobody. Now yuh stage a shootin' match right here in Salinas—"

"Did yuh see what happened here, Sheriff?" Mace cut in, speaking in the same quiet tone.

Seth Toller's muddy eyes flickered. "I'm advisin' yuh not to git smart with *me*, Bucklin!" he said. "There was shootin'—and I seen yuh comin' out of that alleyway with a gun in yore hand. I want to know who yuh was matchin' lead with and what happened to him!"

"His name," said Mace slowly, "is Alvin Hinkel. He's a gambler from the Frisco Barbary Coast. I won thirty thousand dollars in his place—and was lucky enough to shoot my way out with my winnings. I was the first man that ever did. I exposed his crooked games, and he had to close up and git out of Frisco. He swore to git me. He jest tried to plug me in the back. I ain't fired a shot. I aim to locate him afore he kin git away. I suggest, Sheriff, that yuh start helpin' me, 'stead of standin' here!"

"That's a mighty smooth story, Bucklin," said the sheriff, "but it ain't smooth enough. I'm puttin' yuh under arrest till I kin git to the bottom of this thing. Reach! Git his smokers, one of yuh!"

Toller's hands flashed to his belt, but they froze there. He was looking into the deadly muzzle of Mace Bucklin's right-hand gun. The startled townsmen sucked in their breath. They had not seen the Slash K owner's hand move, so fast had been his draw. And his casual manner was gone. His lean, hawklike face was a mask of deadly purpose, his gray eyes alive with menace. He stepped back a pace to bring both his guns to bear on the entire group as well as on the livid-faced sheriff.

"You do the reachin', Sheriff!" he whipped out, his voice charged with the same menace that glowed in his eyes. "Git *his* smokers, one of yuh—and watch yoreselves, all of yuh! Chuck them guns here at my feet!"

IT WAS the Chinaman who stepped to the sheriff, grabbed his guns from the holsters, and threw them at Mace's feet.

"Yuh'll hang fer this!" bellowed Seth Toller, livid with rage. His savage eyes raked the startled group. "Jump him, damn yuh! Yuh goin' to stand there and let the dirty crook git away with this?"

"That's enough out of you, Toller!" said Mace. "Yuh're all through here as sheriff. The rest of you men better git back to yore stores or wherever yuh come from. If yuh reckon yuh want to use yore smokers, jest try it!"

The group stared at him. They hesitated, but only for a moment. They obediently melted away. Mace holstered his left-hand gun. He bent and scooped up the sheriff's weapons, stuffed them into his own belt.

"Git goin'—down to yore jail, Toller!" he directed. "I'm lockin' yuh in one of yore own cells till I check up 'round here on several things—"

He broke off. There was a pounding

of hoofs from the north end of town. Mace knew that several riders were galloping in from the main trail up the valley. Even as he caught the gleam of mocking triumph in Seth Toller's murder-filled eyes, four riders swept into the main street. A yell went up from them as they sighted the sheriff with his arms raised and Mace Bucklin covering him. Guns flashed from holsters as the four yanked their sweat-lathered mounts to a rearing, snorting halt.

"Git him!" Toller yelled. "Git the law-breakin' coyote!"

The big, bearded man did not lack physical courage. His great, sledge-hammer fists clenched, he hurled his bull-like body at Mace in reckless disregard of the deadly gun leveled at him point-blank.

But Mace did not fire. His left fist caught Toller square in the face with a blow that smashed his bearded mouth and sent him staggering back. Mace drew his second gun as he leaped for the shelter of the alleyway.

The guns of the four riders were suddenly roaring and flaming. Red-hot irons seared Mace's shoulder and his leg. Bright blood gleamed magically on his right gun-wrist where a slug nicked across it as he made the alleyway and flung himself against the wall of the feed store.

The street now was a bedlam of yells, curses, thundering guns. The hawk-faced young owner of the Slash K braced himself. He shook his head to clear it. They were raking the opening of the alleyway with a murderous fire now. In a moment they would be here. It flashed on Mace grimly that they figured they had hit him mortally out there in the street, and they were closing in for the kill.

Something almost like the gleam of a killer showed in Mace Bucklin's gray eyes at that critical moment. The glimpse he had caught of the four horsemen told him that they were strangers to Salinas. But they were no strangers to *him!* They were Alvin Hinkel's notorious Death Quartette.

With the aid of these four utterly reckless and vicious cutthroats and gunmen, for two years Alvin Hinkel had ruled and terrorized the evil Barbary Coast of Frisco—until an angry, hawk-faced young cowman named Mace Bucklin had exposed him and had been the means of having him run out of the Golden Gate city.

Mace had expected to meet up with Hinkel any time, but that Hinkel should come into this cattle country with his Death Quartette was more than the owner of the Slash K had expected. Mace's grip on his guns tightened. There was an instant of silence, a silence that was like death itself. He knew what it meant. The rush was coming!

AND then it came. Came with a pound of hoofs, savage yells tearing from animal throats, and roaring guns that filled the head of the alleyway with a screaming hail of lead. Mace did not move. He clung there against the wall, both guns ready. They had not figured on that. There was something else on which they had not figured, and a savage smile twisted Mace Bucklin's lips.

Their mounts were raising clouds of dust in the dry, hot street, and the morning breeze was sweeping the dust into the alleyway. Mace's throat filled with it, as did his eyes. But for a moment the killers could not see him as they came plunging into the alleyway.

Mace Bucklin saw them dimly through a red haze as he shook his eyes clear. His guns lifted, the same deadly weapons with which he had made this quartette seek cover back there in San Francisco. The flaming muzzles moved slightly from left to right and back again. And this time it was no mere warning, as it had been in Frisco. Instant, merciless death leaped from those hot, blazing twin muzzles as they raked the charging killers who sought to riddle him and crush him under iron-shod hoofs.

Screams of agony and horrible curses came from the four doomed killers. Their own flaming guns dropped from bloody, nerveless hands as their shattered bodies convulsed and toppled from saddles. For a mad moment the alleyway became a swirling, dust-filled cavern of hell, with its deafening roar of guns, the screams and curses of vicious men in mortal agony. Berserk mounts, squealing with flaming eyes and bared teeth, lashed out at each other with wicked hoofs, stamping the bodies and faces of their dying masters into pulp.

Mace retreated farther back in the alleyway as a lashing hoof grazed his cheek. In that second of time he knew that a death far more terrible than that from guns faced him, but Mace Bucklin could not bring himself to shoot a horse, even these raging, terror-crazed animals. He slithered back still farther, clinging to the wall, and then he found himself in a depression in the wall that proved to be a doorway. The door was closed tight, but there was space in which to flatten himself.

At last the maddened animals were gone. Vaguely in the swirling haze of dust he saw three of them stampede on down the alleyway, while the fourth horse raced back into the main street. He noted quickly that his own horse was still standing far down the alley. Its ears were flattened and its teeth bared, but, though startled and jumpy, its training was saving it from the panic of the others. The roan stood there, ground-hitched.

But Mace did not run to it. His own guns empty, he jammed them into leather and snatched out the sheriff's weapons from his belt. A glance showed him they were fully loaded. They balanced well in his hands, and that was all he required to make them deadly accurate.

A second strange and deathly silence had fallen upon Salinas, but Mace Bucklin was not fooled by it. His smarting, bloodshot eyes glittered as he stepped out into the corpse-strewn, blood-wet alleyway. He felt warm blood in his left boot, and for a moment a dizziness threatened him. Pain shot through him, and his breath came in hard gasps. But he fought off the dizziness. The battle was not over; it had merely taken an unexpected turn that would arouse Alvin Hinkel to fury. Hinkel would know that it had to be a show-down now, swift, sure, and final.

Stepping over the huddled bodies at the mouth of the alleyway, Mace walked warily out into the main street. Not a soul was in sight. His eyes swept the cluster of buildings, came to rest on an open front window of one of the new hotel rooms over the big new structure that was now the Salinas Saloon, a gambling room and dance hall having been added to the original building. Mace had just passed this building when the dry-gulcher's shot had struck at him, and now he had no doubt that it had come from that open window. But Hinkel would not be up there now, waiting to be caught like a rat in a trap when his notorious bodyguard had failed.

MACE walked slowly up the street, the sheriff's guns in his hands. His eyes still smarted, and there was a dull, throbbing ache in his wounded leg that forced him to limp slightly, but he headed on grimly for the saloon. He knew many eyes were watching his progress from behind store windows and doors. Salinas was keeping strictly neutral and undercover, holding its breath, wondering what it was all about and how it was going to turn out.

Mace was looking for the sheriff as well as for Alvin Hinkel. What had become of Seth Toller? Here was the worst gun-fight ever staged in Salinas, and the sheriff not only was doing nothing about it but he was among the missing. He had vanished into thin air!

Toller had no deputies, playing a

lone hand for reasons best known to himself, but for public effect he should be going through the motions of his job.

He could have obtained other guns by this time and forced some citizens to rally around him.

A HARD smile played around Mace Bucklin's taut lips. Many things were clicking fast now in his brain. Those new additions to the old Salinas Saloon. He had not been coming to town much himself and had not paid much attention, but Andy Farson, he recalled, had told him about some mystery being connected with the new and enlarged saloon. Rumor had it that Jake Toombes, the gray-haired proprietor, had sold it to some new owner who had large and glittering plans for it. But nobody in Salinas knew who this new owner might be, and old Jake had kept denying that he had sold out.

Now it was clear. The new owner was Alvin Hinkel! Hinkel had come with his crooked games and his vicious Death Quartette to murder lucky—or unlucky—winners on the night trails. So he hadn't come here just for revenge on Mace Bucklin, after all. But where was his vicious lieutenant and manager, the blue-eyed little rat known as Baby-face Joe? The whole crew had come to Salinas where the pickings would be good, what with a dozen or more wealthy ranchers using Salinas as a base. And Hinkel knew how to build up a thriving business.

A frown came to Mace's grim face as these thoughts occurred to him while his eyes raked the street. It was Baby-face Joe against whom he had warned Andy Farson. Some things were not clear yet, but if this thing had been planned out—

He stopped, his fingers tightening on triggers. He was abreast of the Chink restaurant. Just inside the open door, a finger to his lips, stood the plump little Chinaman who had so quickly relieved the sheriff of his guns. The Chinaman was beckoning to him.

Mace had already sized up the Oriental. He did not hesitate, but turned swiftly into the restaurant. The Chinaman did not wait to be questioned.

"Mis' Bucklin!" he said swiftly. "Me no like others—me know you all light. You no go to saloon! Strange man there, bad medicine man who is boss of hombres you kill. All come yesterday—velly bad. Fight this morning—they kill poor drunken cowpoke who used to work at Slash K before you buy."

Mace's bloodshot eyes flashed. A cowpoke who used to work for the Slash K — that explained why the riderless horse had come to the Slash K, its former home! Then that hadn't been a plant.

"Me hear things—velly bad things," the Chinese went on. "Sheriff with strange man las' night. Much in with him, but Seth Toller get big cursing out by strange man. Seem that strange man no have know that *you* are in these parts. He blame Seth Toller for not telling him. Terrible fight, almost. But Seth say he fix. Me there bringing grub, which is how I hear. They pay no attention Chinaman."

"All right, Fong, thanks," Mace snapped, his eyes glittering pinpoints. "Where's Toller now?"

"Him in saloon with strange man," informed the Celestial quickly. "That's what I tell you. You hurt bad now. Better so you leave town now. They got another man—call him Baby-face Joe. Maybe him there, too. They were going out to Slash K to get you this morning when they see you up on plateau riding here. They kill you sure now."

BUT Mace, putting the sheriff's guns on the table for a moment, was jamming fresh slugs into his own weapons. He did not seem to be listening now. He shoved the sheriff's guns into his holsters, grabbed up his own,

and walked out to the street. He walked boldly, calmly, with deadly purpose in his glittering eyes, even in his slight limp.

For Mace Bucklin, watching the street from just within the restaurant doorway, had seen something that the Chinaman, standing a little back in the room, could not see. The saloon was at an angle across the street, farther down, but the angle just permitted Mace a view of the high porch and flight of steps.

Two men were coming down those steps. Seth Toller, and a tall, thin, catlike man with a sharp, sallow face and pale, heartless eyes. Guns were in their hands, but they were coming without any special caution. The reason flashed on Mace as he glimpsed them.

Watching him coming up the street, they had noted his limp, his torn face, his shirt wet with spreading blood, and they concluded that he had been mortally hit in that battle in the alleyway and had turned blindly into the restaurant, perhaps to collapse on the floor.

He heard them suck in their breaths as he walked suddenly out into the street to confront them. Their guns flashed up, but Mace Bucklin did not wait. His own deadly weapons were in action even before he saw their hands move. Without mercy he blasted them from the saloon steps. Seth Toller's great, bearded frame crashed headlong.

He was dead as he hit the street, blood spurting from his mouth.

Mace, his smoking guns still in his hands, limped slowly across to the steps. Alvin Hinkel had lurched and fallen against the porch pillar. Shot through the stomach, strangely enough the gambler and killer managed to pull up to his feet, though death was glazing his pale, inhuman eyes.

"If that damned sheriff hadn't—bungled, it would be—you dead now—" he gasped out.

"If yuh hadn't let one of yore skunks plug a poor, helpless cowpoke," said Mace grimly, "yuh *might* not be dyin' now. I wouldn't of come to town lookin' for yuh—not right away. I knew yuh was headin' this way, Hinkel, but I thought yuh was jest after me. I came for the mail the other day, and Abner Fitch dropped a bunch of letters as he was sortin' 'em. I picked 'em up. One was addressed to Alvin Hinkel, and it was marked 'Hold for arrival.' But I shore didn't know yuh was aimin' to operate right here! It musta been a shock to yuh, Hinkel, to git settled and then find I was right here, too."

"I'll see you in hell, damn you, Bucklin! You're all shot up—"

HINKEL did not finish. He crumpled to the ground, hate still trying to gleam in his glazing eyes.

Mechanically Mace removed the sheriff's guns from his holsters, dropped them to the street, and somewhat fumblingly got his own guns into the holsters. Vaguely he knew that men were gathering around him, men with relief and something close to awe in their faces. Old Jake Toombes was standing on the saloon steps, half whimpering.

"I ought to be plugged myself, Bucklin," he was saying, "but I didn't have no idee I was sellin' out to a bunch of crooks and killers."

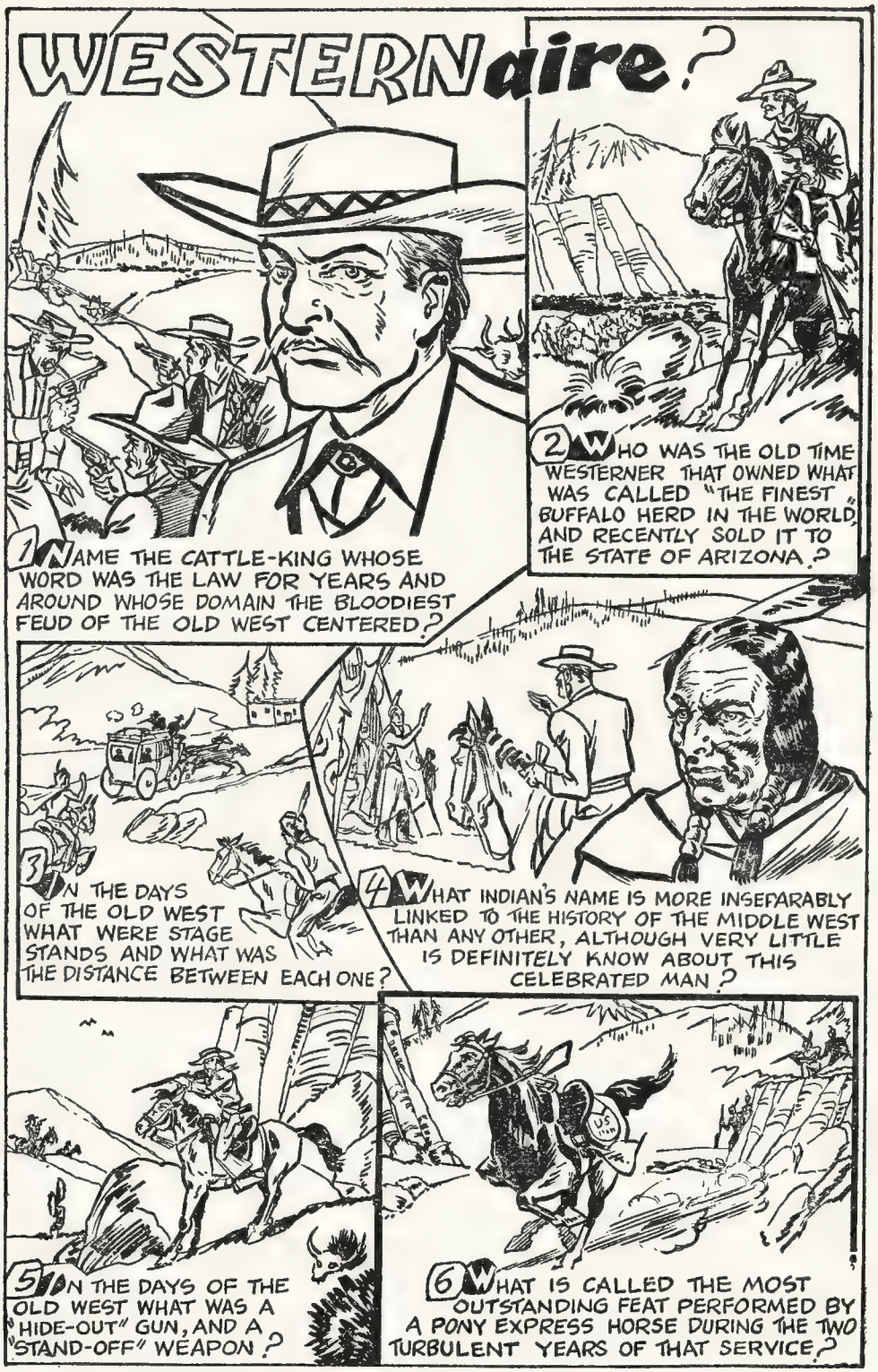
Another man pushed his way through the crowd. It was Andy Farson.

Mace took the lighted quirly Andy handed to him. He dragged on it deeply.

"That blue-eyed rat," he asked thickly. "Did he come there?"

"He did," said Andy Farson, calmly rubbing his leathery chin. "Yeah, he came there, but he didn't leave. He's dead."

"If some of you gents'll kinda help me up the steps" said Mace Bucklin, trying to smile, "I reckon I could do with a drink."


WESTERNaire?
1 NAME THE CATTLE-KING WHOSE WORD WAS THE LAW FOR YEARS AND AROUND WHOSE DOMAIN THE BLOODIEST FEUD OF THE OLD WEST CENTERED?
2 WHO WAS THE OLD TIME WESTERNER THAT OWNED WHAT WAS CALLED "THE FINEST BUFFALO HERD IN THE WORLD" AND RECENTLY SOLD IT TO THE STATE OF ARIZONA?
3 IN THE DAYS OF THE OLD WEST WHAT WERE STAGE STANDS AND WHAT WAS THE DISTANCE BETWEEN EACH ONE?
4 WHAT INDIAN'S NAME IS MORE INSEPARABLY LINKED TO THE HISTORY OF THE MIDDLE WEST THAN ANY OTHER, ALTHOUGH VERY LITTLE IS DEFINITELY KNOW ABOUT THIS CELEBRATED MAN?
5 IN THE DAYS OF THE OLD WEST WHAT WAS A "HIDE-OUT" GUN, AND A "STAND-OFF" WEAPON?
6 WHAT IS CALLED THE MOST OUTSTANDING FEAT PERFORMED BY A PONY EXPRESS HORSE DURING THE TWO TURBULENT YEARS OF THAT SERVICE?

The answers are on page 113—if you MUST look!

Painted Post

A Sheriff Blue Steele Novelet

The Sheriff made a restless, herding motion with the Colt's snout

Sheriff Steele and Deputy Watts Take the Trail of the Judge's Fine Unbranded Horses and Smack Their Own Iron On A Rustler Outfit!

CHAPTER I

Busted Buckaroo

THE evening star hung low over the jagged Sawtooths as "Magpie" Stevens whooped into Painted Post and braked to his usual stop in front of "Thimble Jack's" Saloon. A waiting group loitered on the platform sidewalk. In the purple desert twilight they made out a passenger on the high seat of the stagecoach, beside the gap-toothed, gossipy driver.

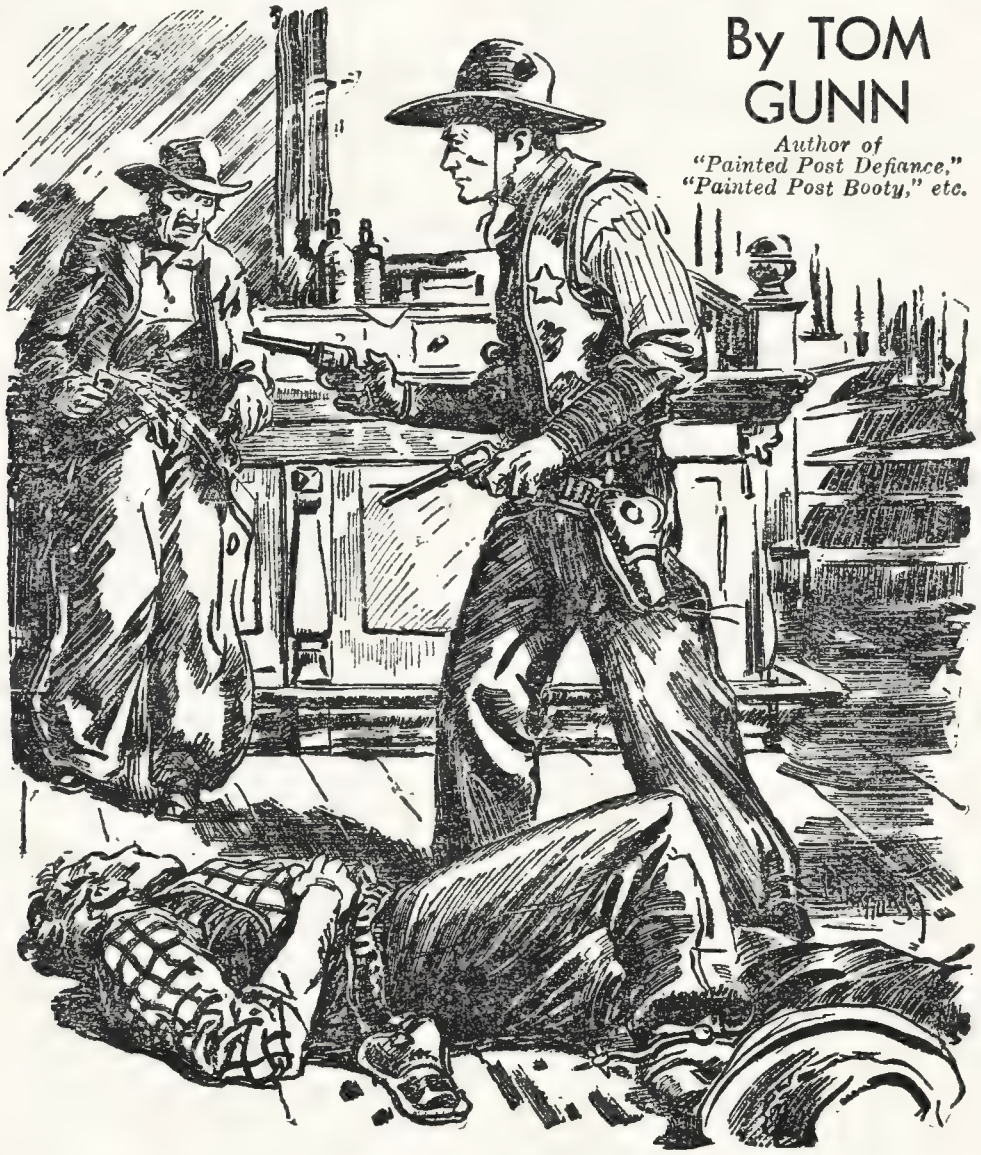
Whipping reins around the footbrake, Magpie stood up pompously and announced:

"I've hired me a corral swamper,

Straddlebug

By TOM GUNN

Author of "Painted Post Defiance," "Painted Post Booty," etc.



folks. He says his name is Straddlebug."

The newcomer unpried himself from the seat as he stood up, stretching himself after the sixty weary miles down from Cottonwood, and the assembled citizens saw that he was strikingly thin and leggy. He stepped down to the front wheel hub, flapped his arms like some ungainly bird, and hit the loose planks in one long jump.

Then Magpie finished the introduction with:

"The dried-up specimen with a jin-

glebob beard and glasses, that's Doc Crabtree, Straddlebug. The others, from left to right, are Judge Bertram, Dictionary Smith, Depitty Shorty Watts, and back there, behind the cigarette, stands the sheriff of Painted Post."

The Straddlebug nodded.

"Howdy, gents," he said.

Then he fastened his attention to the vague, tall form of the sheriff.

"Mighty pleased to meet up with

Sheriff Blue Steele

you, Blue Steele. Reckon yuh're about the best-known lawman in Arizona territory. I been a-hearin' a lot—"

"Get a wiggle on yuh, Straddlebug," Magpie interrupted bruskly. "Unrope that water barrel offen the boot and roll 'er inside."

"Shorty" Watts, the red-headed deputy, shoved himself away from a leaning post that supported the warped wooden canopy of the saloon front.

"Expect a ninety-pound hombre to rassle a two-hundred-pound water keg, Magpie?" he piped up indignantly.

"Lend him yore strong back and weak mind," responded the stage driver, making his stiff descent to the sidewalk. "I don't give a hoot who hefts it."

THE swamper cast Shorty a grateful glance as he rolled sleeves up over his stringy forearms.

"Thanks a heap, friend. But I better do what I hired out to do. Even if I bust a flock of ribs all over again."

Doc Crabtree scowled over the top of his glasses.

"Hold on, there! If them ribs yuh mentioned ain't taped, better not tackle any heavy liftin' just yet, stranger. Let that lazy old billygoat that's bossin' yuh have at it."

"Jugglin' that blaggoned water barrel every down-trip is the main reason I hired the Straddlebug for!" Magpie snapped. "And it wouldn't of been necessary to do so if yuh'd been able to cure my lame back, yuh old pill-bouncer!"

The argument was interrupted by a loud banging inside the saloon as some customer walloped the bar with a bottle and roared in a drink-thick tongue:

"Fill up this bottle 'fore I get riled, yuh bat-eared, splat-footed barkeep!"

"Sounds like my new hoss wrangler is fixin' to get plumb full of red-eye," Judge Bertram rumbled.

"That Whoop Tucker is seven-eighths full already," opined the little, bird-legged "Dictionary" Smith uneasily. "He's noisier'n a treeful of screech owls even when he's sober."

"Blue" Steele's rugged face was etched for an instant in the glow of a cigarette as he took a last drag and flipped the stub out into the dust.

"So long as he shoots off nothin' but his face, no harm's done," he drawled. "Though I'd say he'd do a better job of hoss breakin', Judge, if he stayed sober."

"Reckon I better go tell him to go easy," grunted Bertram. "Fort Bowie needs them cavalry hosses. And I need the cash they'll bring when broke to saddle."

The broad-backed, white-haired

owner of the T Bar T shouldered into the saloon. Doc Crabtree followed.

"How about a little pinochle, Judge?" he asked. "I'll take yore IOU, till yuh collect."

Bertram snorted some challenge. Steele stepped to the swinging batwing doors. Shorty reached out to lend a hand to the Straddlebug who was lowering the water keg. Ignoring his aid, the stringy stranger uttered a strained grunt. The keg banged to the sidewalk.

"Easy there!" rasped Magpie. "Yuh want tuh bust it? Now roll 'er in the saloon, then hustle up to the corral, lower the gate bars, and help me unhitch!"

The Straddlebug waved away Shorty and started rolling the water keg across the sidewalk. The little deputy stepped ahead of him and held the doors open.

Under a hanging kerosene lamp where insects circled, "Whoop" Tucker leaned on the bar, mumbling over a whiskey glass. He was a loose-lipped, bleary-eyed man with a mop of oily hair over one eye.

The sheriff's granite-gray eyes sized him up sharply.

"Better ride while yuh can, Tucker," he advised.

The answer was a wordless snarl.

The water keg rumbled inside. Magpie and Dictionary crowded in as Shorty let the batwing doors swing shut. Each small event was piling up now toward one of those violent climaxes which struck as suddenly as a summer thunderstorm.

The water keg got out of control. It wobbled toward Whoop Tucker's wide-spraddled boots. The Straddlebug made a plunge to retrieve it. But too late. The bronco buster yowled as it thumped over his toes. Then, with the unpredictable response of a troublesome drunk, he lurched clear of the bar and swung a terrific blow at the swamper's upturned, apologetic face.

The old Straddlebug dodged back, just quick enough so that the devastating swing missed by an inch. Whoop Tucker whirled off-balance, toppled over the keg and blasted a fighting name at Magpie's feeble-looking swamper.

It swiftly became evident that the Straddlebug was not as feeble as he looked. The ugly curse did something to him. It lit a spark that exploded him into action.

He was no match for the burly Whoop Tucker in a rough-and-tumble

Deputy Shorty Watts

fight. So instead of squaring off, he pounced on the bronc buster's back as he rose. Those spidery legs clamped around the other's middle so tightly that a spasm of agony convulsed Whoop's red, angry face.

He tried a back-kick with a spurred heel, missed, then reeled toward the bar backward, to smash his burden against it.

He might have accomplished that, crushing the mending ribs, if the Straddlebug hadn't grabbed his ears. Whoop Tucker yowled and swayed as the twist hold turned him, and the paralyzing clamp of the scissorlike legs nearly cut him in half.

"Giddyap!" yelped the Straddlebug. "Prance around the room, and

keep clear of all obstructions or I'll pull yore ears out longer'n a burro's! Giddyap, hombre! I broke tough hosses and tougher men before you was old enough to even reach the stirrups!"

Whoop Tucker, with a prolonged bawl, obediently cavorted. He could do nothing else. The man with the wasted frame had him subdued. With bony legs locked in that crushing grip, he rode the bronc buster around the room, reining him by the ears and providing Painted Post citizens with the most uproarious spectacle that they had enjoyed in months.

Whoop Tucker circled until exhaustion dropped him on his knees in front of Steele.

"Unglue him, Sheriff!" he gasped hoarsely. "He—he's killin' me! I can't stand no more! Get him off, for Gawd's sake! I—I—"

Steele shook the Straddlebug's shoulder.

"Yuh took the fight out of him. Yuh licked him. Let him up—let him breathe!"

The Straddlebug—and everybody realized by now how appropriate the name was—leaped clear, as though alighting from a winded bucker. He flitted nimbly to the bar. Steele stepped between him and the groaning Whoop Tucker. Steele prodded the wrangler with a toe.

"Get up and clear out, like I told yuh," he ordered sternly. "Yuh asked for what yuh got, buckaroo. Now forget it. Mebbe yuh'll sober up on yore way back to the T Bar T."

Gripping his aching loins, Whoop Tucker staggered erect and hobbled to the doorway. He was sober enough by now to understand the extent of his humiliation. Mocking laughter rang in his ears. Jeering jibes scored his pride. His face was a sickly, mottled pattern of crimson and green.

"To blazes with the T Bar T!" he howled. "I'm done with my job, and I'm done with this blasted town! But I ain't done with that—that animated scarecrow, and I ain't done with you, Steele!"

He backed to the sidewalk, still unable to straighten. He paused out there for one parting burst of abuse.

"I ain't done with you, either, Bertram, yuh frog-faced baboon! Yuh'll pay! Yuh'll all pay!"

HE VAMOOSED then. He rode out of town, spurring his horse into a wild run. Thimble Jack, round-eyed and pale, gusted relief.

"Glory, I'm glad he's gone!"

He uncorked and shoved a quart of rye toward the Straddlebug.

"Have a drink out of the bottle he ordered filled but forgot to take with him," he invited. "Yuh shore earned it, stranger."

The Straddlebug had quickly won the respect and admiration of Painted Post. But as he faltered shakily before the bar, hardly able to lift a glass, it was plain to all eyes that he was far from being a well man.

"Don't look like yuh'll be much use to me," Magpie said callously.

"I'll give him a lookin' over tomorrow and mebbe fix him up," offered Doc Crabtree.

The Straddlebug wagged his head discouragedly.

"Nothin' yuh can tell me I don't know, Doc," he breathed. "I got busted up purty bad. By a cayuse."

"Get throwed?" asked Shorty.

The Straddlebug straightened himself with a show of spirit.

"I never was bucked off in my life," he declared. "Mebbe I'd be better off today if I had been. When that Montana outlaw critter fell on me."

"Yuh're a bronc peeler, then?" Judge Bertram asked hopefully.

"Never worked at anything else, Judge. Not until I took this swamper job."

"Now that Whoop Tucker's cleared out, mebbe he can handle that job," suggested Shorty.

The Straddlebug shook his head again.

"I've forked the best and the worst in my time, till I got piled up on a rock, like I told you. I—I ain't in no shape to draw tophand pay no more, thankin' yuh all jest the same. I'm jest a broken down has-been."

"Yuh shore ain't fit to rassle water barrels," Magpie agreed unfeelingly. "Here, take this dollar. I'm payin' yuh off. Get along over to Chow Now's and buy yoreself a supper."

The Straddlebug swallowed his pride with an effort. He was a rider from northern ranges, typical of the breed. Keen-faced, quiet-spoken.

"Much obliged," he said with visible restraint as he pocketed the dollar. "Sorry about the rumpus, Sheriff."

"You got nothin' to apologize for," Steele assured him, "and if yuh want to stay around town for a rest-up, yuh're welcome."

"Thanks, Sheriff. I'd appreciate knowin' yuh better and longer. But I ain't a charity case—not yet. Reckon I can deadhead back to Cottonwood on tomorrow's up-trip."

"I roll bright and early," said Magpie.

CHAPTER II

Good Guessing

THE Straddlebug left the saloon. There was a moment of uncomfortable silence. Then Shorty bristled in front of the stage driver.

"Magpie, yuh're a squinch-eyed, penny-pinchin' stinkeroo!" he accused.

"I double it!" snorted Doc Crabtree.

"Well, I ain't no charitable institution!" crackled Magpie. "Not for every busted down buckaroo that drifts into Arizona!"

He stamped outside, to turn the stage and corral the tired horses. Thimble Jack turned to his back mirror, smoothing a curlecue lock over his bald spot.

"All this talk," he said, "and I'm the only one that done anything for the pilgrim. He had a drink on the house."

Then he put the bottle that Whoop Tucker had left under the bar. It was an old empty that the horse wrangler had brought in. Steele's sharp gaze had explored the label, but he said nothing. Doc Crabtree flung himself in a chair by the card table.

"C'mon, Judge," he urged. "How about some pinochle?"

The storm had passed. With harmony restored, Dictionary Smith emerged from his cranny at the far end of the bar.

"When I was paintin' barn ads for Doc Pinkham's Pink Pills for Pale People," he remarked, "I used to hand out free medicine samples. If I can locate some left-overs in my duffle, mebbe they might perk up this Straddlebug feller."

"That nostrum ain't fit for coyote bait!" snapped Doc Crabtree as he shuffled a card pack. "And don't you go prescribin' it!"

Steele strolled outside. The night was warm, and the velvety sky was spangled with stars now. Across the dusty street, lamplight shone from the window of Chow Now's eatery. Inside, he saw the Straddlebug cleaning up a plate of bacon and eggs. He crossed, entered and lopped a leg over an adjoining stool. The thin man jerked an amiable nod and his eyes lowered to the ivory-butted Colts that bracketed Steele's flat hips.

"Fastest draw in the Southwest, folks say," he commented. "Yore reputation's spread father'n yuh realize, Sheriff."

Steele smiled thinly.

"I got a notion you savvy which end comes out of a holster first," he said.

A reminiscent gleam crept into the thin man's hollow eyes.

"I ain't got enough middle to hold up a gun-belt no more," he said sadly.

Steele motioned to Chow Now for coffee. He leaned a confidential elbow on the counter.

"S'pose yuh take up Judge Bertram on that job offer," he suggested. "There's some young buttons out at the T Bar T that can top the bad ones for yuh."

"Never did try hoss breakin' from the sidelines," said the Straddlebug. "Jest what's on yore mind, Sheriff?"

They talked the same language, a range jargon in which men could convey their meaning in things left unsaid, or barely hinted at.

"Whoop Tucker, he's been keepin' bad company," Steele stated casually.

"And the judge don't know it yet, is that it?"

"The judge, he's got a good eye for horses. He can estimate to a grass blade how many cattle a piece of range can support. And he's a fair hand at cards. But he don't always size up men like he should."

THE Straddlebug spun his dollar toward the Chinese and got to his feet.

"Keep it," he said, "and owe me breakfast." Then to Steele:

"I'll bed down in the corral tonight, if yuh got no objections, Sheriff. Then in the morning—"

Steele had hoped that the Straddlebug would ride out to the T Bar T that night, when Bertram returned to his spread. But it was evident that the man was fagged out. Ten miles in the saddle would be too much for him, on top of the long stage trip.

"I'll fix it with the judge," he said.

When he returned to Thimble Jack's, he astonished the bartender.

"That bottle Whoop Tucker rushed off without," he said. "It's a handy size for a saddle pocket. Reckon I can use it."

He paid for it and headed for the jail office. Striking a match, he reached for the bracket lamp above his desk. He adjusted the wick, then sat down and set the bottle on the desk. He studied it closely this time, and was absorbed in this peculiar interest when Shorty entered.

The little deputy cut a yawn short, staring.

"Since when you took to likker?" he asked, puzzled. Rarely had he seen Steele take a drink, and never alone.

The sheriff slid the bottle into a desk drawer and reached for the makings. He offered no explanation.

"When the cavalry buys hosses, they prefer slickears," he said. "Any brand mark is considered a blemish."

"Yeah, I've heard the judge say that. He. . . . But say, hold on, Sheriff! What for yuh make that remark?"

Steele licked a cigarette shut.

"I'm hopin' the judge don't sign too many IOUs in that pinochle game. Here's something else. In our last trouble with the Los Pasos crowd, you glued onto some of their hardware, as I remember."

"Only one gun in the bunch that's worth much. A Bisley model Forty-five."

"Wherever yuh've got it stashed, dig it out, *segundo*. Along with a handful of loads."

"Know somebody I can swap or sell it to?" Shorty asked, brightening.

"Yuh're loanin' it, *segundo*. Trot out to the corral with it, pronto. Before that Straddlebug hombre turns in."

"Yuh mind tellin' a man what all this mystery's about?" sputtered the little deputy.

Steele lit his cigarette and leaned back in his desk chair, fingers locked behind his head, rock-hard eyes veiled with lazy lids.

"Ain't shore myownself," he said. "Jest guesswork. Get along, *segundo*, while I do some thinkin'. . . ."

Judge Bertram rode back into Painted Post early next morning, hot and lathery. He stamped into the jail office, his square, ruddy face wrathful.

"Hoss thieves, by Godfrey!" he boomed, brandishing a fist.

Steele eyed him serenely.

"Every head of yore Fort Bowie stock cleaned out overnight—is that correct?"

The judge blinked.

"Thunderation!" he shouted. "Where did you grab onto yore advance information? And having same, why didn't yuh act?"

"How far down the river did yuh track 'em?" Steele asked.

The judge gaped now, breathlessly.

"If yuh know so much, by Godfrey, tell me who stole 'em and where they was took to?"

"Jest what good will that do? Yuh've got no brands to claim 'em on. And the only man that could back up yore identification of that cavvy, he don't work for yuh any more, Judge."

BERTRAM slumped onto a bench and mopped his face.

"That's jest it!" he groaned. "Steele, it looks like I'm out about a thousand in hossflesh! Before we can ever catch up with the crooks, they'll have 'em branded and mebbe sold!"

The Straddlebug rode down from the feed corral on a borrowed horse that wore a borrowed saddle.

"Howdy, Sheriff," he called out. "If yuh'll tell me whichaway to the T Bar T, I'll. . . . Oh, mornin', Judge! I didn't know—"

Steele leaned in the jail office doorway.

"That job of yores on the Bertram outfit, it's going to be real easy, *amigo*," he interrupted. "That is, so far's hoss breakin' is concerned."

"That deal's off!" whooped the judge. "I'll be lucky if I can pull through till fall roundup! This wouldn't of happened if Whoop Tucker'd stayed on!"

He glared at the Straddlebug as though he were responsible for the loss of both the wrangler and the horses.

"It wouldn't of happened if Tucker hadn't of quit, yuh mean, Judge," corrected Steele.

"Yuh referrin' to them threats he made last night?"

"I've got stronger evidence than that," Steele assured him, running a hand over the loads that studded his gunbelt. "The chances are yore hosses are grazin' on Robles grass that belongs to that Los Pasos mob right now."

Shorty leaped at this hint of action.

"There's a way to make shore!" he cried. "A dozen hosses leave tracks!"

Sheriff Blue Steele Tackles the Crookedest Outfit that Ever Hit Indian County

IN

Painted Post Defense

Another Exciting Action Novelet

By TOM GUNN

Next Issue

Steele strolled out to the edge of the sidewalk to stroke the white-starred forehead of the bay that the Straddlebug rode.

"Foggin' after 'em won't help much now," he declared. "The thing is to find Whoop Tucker and twist a confession out of him. That'll prove yore ownership, Judge. Savvy?"

"Since yuh know so much about everything else, mebbe yuh also know where Whoop can be found!" blasted Bertram.

Steele's thin lips wore a mysteriously confident smile.

"He'll be back at the T Bar T," he stated. "That's bein' arranged for right now. With Magpie spreadin' the news that the Straddlebug, here, has gone to work for yuh, Judge. Whoop Tucker, he's not the kind to pass up a chance for quick revenge for the lickin' he got."

"Do we jest set around here and wait for that to happen?" wailed Shorty.

The sheriff's manner turned brisk.

"We'll do our settin' in saddle, *segundo*. We're ridin' as far as the Caliente ford with the judge and his new bronc peeler, here."

He started for the feed corral with long, energetic strides, and with Shorty trotting eagerly after him.

The four of them rode north on the stage road, making no pause or hardly any conversation during the five miles of steady going. Where the stage tracks dipped through willowy bottomlands to the gravelly shallows, the sheriff reined up his fast, steel-dust gelding and reached for the makings.

He now addressed the Straddlebug.

"Over those lava-capped hills, to the northeast, is the Robles Ranch, bossed these days by a man named Sam Kettleman. It borders the judge's range, though it's not in my bailiwick. It's in Los Pasos County."

"And hatchin'-grounds for most of the trouble we have all along the Border country," rumbled Bertram.

"If you was to go over there, on a look-see for the missin' hosses, yuh'd jest be a bad-mannered intruder, minus authority?" the Straddlebug asked. "Is that it, Sheriff?"

"That never stopped us in times past," Shorty chirped.

"I still don't think Whoop Tucker was in cahoots with the Los Pasos crowd," insisted Bertram. "The only thing that'll make me believe it is if you nab him there, with the Robles outfit, Steele."

THE sheriff lit his cigarette and flicked the match to the lapping edge of the river.

Again it was the half-spoken language of the range. Judge Bertram, raw-nerved by his loss, was insinuating that the sheriff lacked the nerve to face the Robles crowd on their own ground.

Steele could have endured the veiled taunt. But the Straddlebug's plaintive gaze was on him. From the first, the crippled buckaroo had openly admired Steele. There was something akin to hero worship in his respectful regard. But that sentiment was fading from his eyes now. Disillusionment crept into them. Judge Bertram had called the sheriff. Was he going to lay down?

Steele finally spoke.

"Judge, I'd hoped to do this the easy way. The main idea bein' to get back yore cavvy. Puttin' Whoop Tucker where he belongs was jest incidental to that, the way I had it planned."

The Straddlebug's emaciated face lighted.

"Then—then yuh're foggin' in there after 'em, Sheriff?" he jerked out.

Steele's answer was to knee the gelding into the river. Shorty sent the pinto plunging after him. Bertram and his new man followed, the Straddlebug drawing his long legs up as his bay breasted the current in the middle of the stream.

"Sheriff," he said, when he splash-

ingly emerged on the opposite bank, "I'm halfway responsible for this whole affair. Comin' as it did, as a result of my little set-to with that jigger Tucker."

"Meanin' yuh crave to help settle it?"

The Straddlebug patted the .45 tucked into his waist, the one Shorty had produced for him.

"I'd be flattered a heap at the chance," he said.

Judge Bertram looked a little sheepish. Everybody had volunteered for danger now except him. Three men were ready to shoot their way to a showdown for his horses.

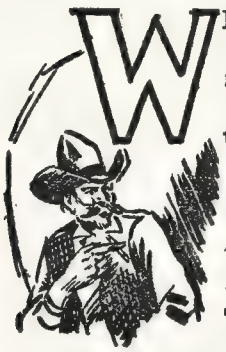
"I'll fog over to the Robles spread myownself, alone," he declared impulsively.

Steele speared him with a grim glance.

"You herd yoreself home, Judge. You and yore new buster. When the *segundo* and me go huntin' trouble, we need elbow room. *Adios.*"

CHAPTER III

Hornet's Nest



WITH that curt leave-taking, the two lawmen headed downriver. Halfway to the dark gap in the range of hills where the river flowed through, they cut the sign of driven horses. A dozen sets of tracks and more, fresh and distinct in the silty bottomlands.

They clung to the sign and it led them, as Steele had foretold, toward the Robles place that was known as an outlaw hang-out. But to blot the getaway trail, the rustlers took to the river as it neared the gap.

The dark lava walls closed on Steele and Shorty as they rode through swift riffles, skirted a pool on a narrow strip of gravel hurled up by past floods against the sheer walls of Caliente Gap. They emerged on a sage slope that rose to a *cienaga* bench where the old Robles adobe was half-hidden in a clump of cottonwoods.

It was hardly yet mid-morning. The trail that led up toward the ranchhouse was across a long, open slope. Their approach would be visible for long minutes. In such an interval, whoever was up there at the ranchhouse could recognize them and prepare a hot reception.

The trail dipped through a steep, narrow draw, and Shorty was relieved as Steele reined to a thicket of stunted liveoaks and stepped out of saddle.

It was a snug hiding place and here they could watch the trail. And halt whoever headed along it toward the T Bar T.

Shorty swung from the pinto and dropped his reins.

"Me, I'd jest as soon hole up here till dark," he announced. "Though I shore do wish I'd been smart enough to lug along a saddle snack from Chow Now's."

Steele squatted cross-legged under a tree, pouring dry tobacco crumbs into a curl of brown paper.

"They still hold on to the old Mex custom of takin' a *siesta* snooze at noontime on the Robles place," he told the little deputy. "When the sun's overhead, we'll finish our little *pasear.*"

It was nerve-trying, that wait. Shorty stretched out in the shade, hat over his face, and pretended to doze. Steele smoked endlessly, wrapped in sphinxlike silence, eyes unswervingly fixed on the trail, a gunshot below.

Once, from under the hat, Shorty squintingly observed the sheriff gouge a little furrow in the ground with a bootheel, pick up a handful of the loosened soil, and examine it studiously. Letting the reddish clay of the sloping benchland sift through his fingers.

"Good growin' ground, this gumbo is," Shorty droned sleepily.

"Sticky when wet," Steele responded. "And right hard to remove from whatever it sticks onto."

Shorty pushed his hat onto his red topknot and sat up.

"That don't sound like jest a chance remark," he stated.

"Same sort of soil that was stuck onto the bottle I put away in my desk drawer," Steele went on.

"The bottle that Whoop Tucker lugged in for Thimble Jack to fill up!" exclaimed Shorty, with dawning understanding.

"And which bottle bore the label of the Eagle Saloon, in Los Pasos."

"So that's how yuh was so certain Whoop Tucker'd been in cahoots with the crooks over thisaway!"

"That"—Steele nodded—"and the fact that I observed whitewash marks on the underside of Tucker's hat brim when it fell off in that tussle with the Straddlebug. The only place in this country where the walls are whitewashed, where gents hang their headgear, is the Robles cookshack."

Shorty's lips puckered in a low whistle of admiration.

"Good gravy, Sheriff! That means Whoop was playin' in with the Robles outfit whilst he worked for Judge Bertram!"

"As I believe I've remarked," Steele replied dryly. He tilted a look upward, then rose. "It's noon, *segundo*. Let's ride."

THE Robles ranchhouse, in which Sam Kettleman, generally reputed to be the latest leader of the outlaws had his headquarters, was a landmark that outdated any other dwelling in the Border country. Built before American occupation of the Southwest, its thick adobe walls supported a low spread of tile roof that had withstood Indian attacks.

In these later days of outlawry, the once prosperous *hacienda* had fallen into neglect. Plaster had fallen from the walls in great patches. And gunfights had left sinister souvenirs of bullet holes in the massive hewn timbers that framed windows and doors.

Flanking the old adobe on the north was a lean-to frame annex that was cookshack and bunkhouse. The whitewashed walls that had provided Steele with his clue to Whoop Tucker's treachery were visible through a rickety screen door.

The ranch yard was shaded from the south by a semi-circle of cottonwoods that reached out to the barn and corrals. Toward it, the lawmen made their cautious advance, with the trees screening them.

Beside a roughened trunk Steele alighted with care not to jingle his spurs. By the cookshack doorway was a long washbench. Stretched out on it, with a peak-crowned felt hat covering his face, was a man in the attitude of sleep. One leg dangled. His hands were locked across his chest. On the ground beside him a cigarette butt sent up a tiny, lazy curl of smoke.

That hat which covered his face was the one that had rolled to the floor of Thimble Jack's Saloon. The silver-studded band was a part of Whoop Tucker's get-up.

Steele tossed the gelding's reins to Shorty. He loosened Colts in their holsters and started boldly across the open ground, afoot. Sixty yards to go, and the hand of the Law would clamp onto Whoop Tucker's shoulder.

The sheriff was halfway across when Shorty's eyes rounded in sudden realization that this was a cunningly arranged trap. A rifle barrel jutted out from under a partly-raised window of the house. The sight was trained on Steele.

A cry of warning stuck in the little deputy's dry throat. But in that breathless interval, Steele saw his peril. There followed that incredibly swift draw of his, part of a movement that swung his lean body half around, his right-hand gun jarring thunderously as it leaped clear of holster.

The window exploded into jagged fragments, three inches above the aim-

ing rifle. Whoop Tucker flipped over, whipping a six-gun from under him. The Colt in Steele's left hand boomed. The slug ripped a water bucket, close to Whoop Tucker's head. His face was promptly deluged, ruining what he had hoped to be a quick and deadly shot.

He leaped up, sputtering and half-blinded, and flung himself bodily through the screen door, into the cookshack.

The premises pulsed with life now. Shouts resounded from the house and the little frame annex. Boots beat an alarm on the wooden floor with a hollow sound like war-drums.

The rifle hung out of the window by its trigger guard. The man behind it was no longer a menace. His agonized cries mingled with the shouts from his hidden comrades.

Steele might have regained the partial cover of the trees in that momentary confusion. But he did not retreat, despite Shorty's shrill entreaties. He streaked for the cookshack doorway. The door slammed. He scooped the wash bench up in his arms and, using it as a battering ram charged the door.

The end of the strong bench crashed through, splintering the door. He followed and gunshots reverberated inside as the surprised defenders fled before him. Through a woodshed that connected the cookshack and bunkhouse.

And now, down from behind the barn, where they had evidently been waiting in saddle, two riders streaked for the scene of action. Here was a moment of difficult decision. Under the law, it might reasonably be construed that this pair was defending their premises from an unprovoked attack. Whatever justification theirs might have been under the code of reasonable conduct, all that mattered to Shorty was that they were trapping Steele.

So he did not wage any long argument with his conscience. He whipped out his .45 and started triggering.

He cut one rider down cleanly. Hitting the ground, the man bounded, rolled and flapped out limply, face upturned.

The other wheeled and answered the volley with desperately fast shooting that sent bark flying and milled the gelding and pinto. All Shorty's attention was needed to keep them from bolting. The hubbub in the bunkhouse increased to fierce volleying. With the scent of stale food that drifted from the cookshack the sharper smell of powdersmoke mingled.

Where was the sheriff? Had his audacious venture ended disastrously? The surviving rider was into the trees now. He and the little deputy were only a rope's throw apart. He dismounted and went to work, duelling his way through the dense barrier of trunks and screening foliage.

[*Turn page*]

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Shorty dropped flat as a bullet pierced his sleeve, just above the elbow, and stung like a hornet. A swift glance proved that the grazing contact had left a trifling mark, no deeper than a vaccination. But it was an uncomfortably close call. And there were the horses to think of. To cut off their escape, this attacker might drill the gelding and pinto.

Shorty kept his man dodging busily. Then a rifle cracked and a bullet slapped the tree so close to Shorty's face that the splatter of bark lanced his cheek.

He flung a dismayed look back, and saw that somebody in the house had grabbed the dangling rifle. He squirmed partly over and fired across his shoulder for that jagged opening in the pane—and was astonished by the result of his frantically quick aim. The .45 slug must have struck some vital part of the breech mechanism, for the rifle flipped against the window sash from the impact, and he heard the man behind it swearing and struggling with the jammed lever.

The skulker in front of him fired a wild shot that drilled the tapadero of one of Shorty's stirrups, missing the pinto by a tiny margin. Shorty answered it with the last cartridge in his .45. His target was a projecting arm. A scream, and the arm was jerked out of sight. It looked like the skirmish was over from this quarter, unless the ambusher could throw lead with his one good hand.

But how about the sheriff? Deadly quiet now from the direction of the bunkhouse. What did it mean? Somehow, sudden stillness was more ominous than the clamor that had preceded it.

The riderless horse had trotted off behind the bunkhouse and now Shorty heard the drum of hoofs, receding rapidly to the other side of the ranch buildings.

Steele appeared at the cookshack doorway, stepping past the battered door, jerking an arm signal, beckoning. Shorty sprang up, hit saddle, and by a skillful feat of horsemanship spurted the pinto across the ranch yard, gripping the gelding's reins.

STEELE met him with a rush, vaulting to leather.

"Tucker made a getaway!" he gritted. "Struck out for Los Pasos!"

Without any further word, the two lawmen acted in the unison that made them such a smoothly-working team. They raced out past the barn, beyond gun reach, making a wide circle southeasterly, in pursuit of a rider who was little more than a speck at the head of a scarf of dust.

The hopelessness of overtaking him before he reached Los Pasos, five miles down the river, was apparent. Steele reined up.

"What happened in there, when yuh dived into that hullabaloo?" babbled Shorty. "Good gravy, Sheriff, it looked like yuh was a goner for a while!"

Having emerged from the brief, furious fight without a scratch seemed no miracle to Steele.

"I jest guessed straight, *segundo*. The hombres that are in cahoots with Whoop Tucker, they're somewhere with the judge's hosses."

'Sounded to me like there was a heap o' cahooting goin' on in that bunkhouse!"

"Shootin' through a board partition and a woodpile, yes. Makin' a lot of gun racket to keep up their courage, that was. Reckon they're holed up there yet, too scared to look out."

"There was two jiggers in the adobe and two more hid beyond the barn!"

Steele nodded grimly.

"I observed the carcass of one that you exterminated. Yuh realize what that means?"

"Means I done some fancy shootin'."

"And that we've got to do some fancy sleuthin' to cinch this rustlin' case. To forestall any argument that our raid on the Robles place was il-

legal. The Los Pasos crowd, they'll put up a big holler at the Territorial capital on the claim that our attack on 'em was unprovoked, unless we can prove who stole the T Bar T cavvy."

"And the proof slipped through our fingers!"

"There'd been a back door cut into the cookshack since I saw the place last," Steele answered wryly. "Whoop Tucker slipped through, after I wrecked the door. Barricaded hisself into the woodpile, between the cookshack and bunkhouse, and was provided with a lucky and unexpected means of vamoosin' when that hoss whose owner yuh shot pranced up in grabbin' distance!"

The affair had been a curious mixture of good luck and bad. Good, in that they had survived it. Bad, in that their quarry had escaped. Shorty pondered it for a moment.

"Then we tail Tucker clean into Los Pasos?"

"We need him—bad."

CHAPTER IV

Sam Kettleman

AVENTURE so bold called for adroitness. They both knew that their appearance in Los Pasos, on the heels of Whoop Tucker, would be the signal for prompt retaliation. The lawmen would be gunned on sight.

They jogged down the slope in thoughtful silence to the river bottoms where the Los Pasos trail, with Whoop Tucker's tracks fresh in the dust and sand, wound through mesquite thickets, with little open glades where the arrow weed grew densely.

The bottomland was crisscrossed with cattle trails. They glimpsed sleek Robles range stock just before they came to the river. The river bed was wide, but the surface flow at this season was reduced to a trickle below Caliente Gap.

They crossed. The muddied water had not yet settled in the stagnant backwater where Whoop Tucker had dashed through. It was tantalizing to have failed by so small a margin of time. But had they pressed the pursuit, Whoop Tucker would have left the trail and taken to cover. In this maze of chaparral, an army of riders might hunt for days for a lone fugitive.

The heat was stifling. Mounting a low benchland where the trail wound among massive granite boulders, Steele kneed the gelding to the shady side of one massive formation and stepped out of saddle. There was a little breeze up here. He peeled off his hat and sleeved his brow.

"Mr. Tucker, he's reached the Eagle Saloon jest about now," he calculated. "Our best bet is to give him time to get properly drunk."

"Suits me," panted Shorty. He dismounted, red-faced and wilted, and flung himself on the shaded ground. "I shore do wish these marauders would hold off operations till cooler weather."

Steele built himself a smoke and reached for a match. He squatted and leaned back against the rock, thinking, as the little deputy dozed, confident that the sheriff would hit on some ingenious plan, as he always had, for ultimate success. . . .

Two men had been hurried on the journey into eternity in that few minutes of gunwork at the Robles stronghold. The first man who had thrust that rifle through the window had joined in death the rider that Shorty had drilled through.

Two others had suffered. "Denver" Dowell, who had swapped lead with Shorty under the cottonwoods was in torment with a shattered wrist. He implored Sam Kettleman, whom he called "boss," to get a doctor.

Kettleman had a gash over his left

eye, resulting from the splash of hot lead that had ricocheted from the rifle when he took the dead man's post at the window of the adobe. He was a big, sallow man with a thinly-haired dome and a habit of soft, sneering laughter that sounded like a snake's hiss.

Despite his own injury, he laughed at Denver Dowell's groaning pleas. Sam Kettleman's laugh was mirthless. It betrayed his utter cruelty. A newcomer to Los Pasos County, he had brought with him an evil reputation. He was dreaded among the group that took his orders at the Robles Ranch.

"Yuh had yore chance at the little redhead when his hosses danced," he growled at Denver Dowell. "Shore yuh had yore chance—and missed."

"You didn't do so good either," groaned Dowell.

"Misplaced confidence in a crooked-shootin' gun, which I wouldn't had use for if the rest of yuh had been worth yore beans. A doctor, huh! I can saw that paw of yores off as good as any sawbones!"

Denver Dowell howled a protest.

"Then let it rot off!" Sam Kettleman snickered, hunting himself a cool spot in the *patio* and sitting down to think over what had happened so fast.

THE fact that stood out plain was that Steele was after Whoop Tucker. That, Kettleman realized, was because the ex-T Bar T horse wrangler was the one link between the horse theft and the Robles Ranch.

His next thought was that the best way to break this unsavory connection was to get rid of Whoop Tucker.

"Wonder why I never thought of that sooner," he reflected. He smiled and rubbed his hands together in secret amusement.

As evening came, he decided to ride into Los Pasos, find Tucker, and discover some plausible excuse for killing him. Dowell heard him order a horse brought from the corral. He beseeched the boss to let him accompany him. In Los Pasos there might be some aid.

Kettleman was on the point of refusing. Then a crafty gleam came into his cold eyes and he ordered a second horse saddled for the wounded man.

They rode together at dusk. Kettleman packed Dowell's gun. As they neared the river, he rode close and stated his cold-blooded proposition.

"Yuh're purty mad at Tucker for lettin' yuh down in that ruckus with Steele and clearin' out. Mad enough to kill him. Savvy?"

"That wouldn't help any now," croaked Dowell.

"It'll help you—if yuh was to grab this six-gun away from me and let him have six in the belly."

"Jest how would it help me, Boss?" quavered Dowell.

Kettleman laughed silently.

"I ain't nursin' no one-handed cripple unless he's of some use to me," he said, and added meaningly: "Tucker, he'll be at the Eagle."

With the shattered wrist resting in a neckerchief sling, Dowell finished the ride in sullen silence. At the hitch-rail in front of the saloon, the two men alighted. Kettleman steered his henchman toward the swinging doors, stilling his weak protests.

"Tucker first," he said. "The doc for yore wrist afterwards."

At the head of the bar Whoop Tucker stood, in the same unsteady condition he had been in at Thimble Jack's when the water keg had rolled over his foot. He swayed around, eyeing the two arrivals and their marks of combat. But nothing was said until they took places beside him, Dowell at his right, Kettleman edging in between. Kettleman threw back his coat so that the butt of the six-gun was clear for Dowell's left hand when the moment came.

Kettleman ordered drinks for the three of them. Whoop Tucker swayed against his elbow.

"How did it end up?" he asked, in a blurred whisper.

Kettleman picked up his drink and stepped back a little. He winked broadly at the suffering Dowell.

"Denver here, he'll explain the wind-up. He'll diagram it. Talk up, Denver."

The wounded man's shaky left hand toyed with his liquor. He slanted a look at Tucker's bloated face, figuring out the murderous act, move by move. He would dash the drink into the drunken wrangler's face and hurl the fighting word. As Tucker drew, he would let him have it. The way was clear between them, with Kettleman standing well back from the bar.

But Dowell was pale and weak and the drink sparkled invitingly. He needed it, if ever a man did. He tossed it down and shoved out his glass toward the bartender.

"Fill 'er up," he ordered huskily.

HIS good hand slid out and grasped the glass. Kettleman was watching him with a frozen smile. Dowell lifted the glass, spilling a little, snarled the ugly epithet and with a quick, backhanded flip sent the liquor squarely into Tucker's lowered face.

A crackling oath burst from the wrangler's lips. He pawed at his eyes and the other hand dipped to his holster.

Dowell's left hand awkwardly produced the six-gun from Kettleman's belt. Talk along the bar was chopped off and the bartender crouched, ready to duck flying lead, at the signal of that savage interchange.

In that same instant, the saloon doors parted. The wiry, six-foot figure of Blue Steele slid inside. His Colts sprang to his hands and in a whiplash voice he snapped the command:

"Drop 'em, both of yuh! Let go, sudden!"

Even the stupefied Tucker stiffened. The trio turned. Two guns thumped to the floor as every eye in the place swiveled to the sheriff of Painted Post who advanced slowly on the three men at the head of the bar.

From the rear of the saloon a rusty, high-pitched voice knifed the silence.

"Keep yore places, everybody! Hands on the mahogany, in front of yuh!"

Necks twisted again. In an archway, close to the open back door of the saloon, stood Shorty, his .45 braced against him, the muzzle sweeping the line-up of customers. How he had managed to get there nobody had noticed.

There was a green-topped card table and some chairs in the small alcove past the archway. He must have motioned his command to the two men sitting there. For they sat rigid and motionless, their hands flat on the green baize tabletop.

With one Colt, Steele motioned Whoop Tucker toward the street.

"We're travelin', hombre! Get started."

Kettleman's sallow cheeks jerked as his insolent mask of a smile slipped off.

"Hold on, Steele," he said, steadying himself with his back to the bar.

The sheriff's granite gray eyes flicked to the cut over the big man's eye.

"So you was the jigger behind the window," he said.

A sigh escaped Denver Dowell's pallid lips. His legs folded and he slumped to the floor. His endurance had reached an end. Steele kicked the guns away from him. He made another restless, herding motion with the Colt's snout.

"You march too, Sam Kettleman—outside."

The Robles Ranch boss got control of his facial muscles by drawing a hand slowly across his lips.

"S'pose we talk right here, Steele. I got nothin' to hide. Nothin' to keep from my friends here." The hand indicated the file of men along the bar. "That is, if they are my friends." He added that with significant emphasis.

"Don't try to prove it, nobody!" Shorty ordered harshly.

He passed along in back of them to the front of the saloon and shoved open the doors.

"There's been a little hoss thievery in Indian County," he explained. "Otherwise, this is jest a friendly visit, gents."

Kettleman shrugged, shoved from the bar and started toward the open door. Steele was closing in behind, shoving the lurching Tucker in front of him.

THEN it happened. Kettleman toed one of the six-guns back to Denver Dowell's outstretched hand. In the few moments of delay, he had seen that the wounded man was no longer unconscious. Dowell's eyes had flickered open and in them shone a pain-maddened longing for revenge on the little deputy who had maimed him.

Steele leaped, kicking at the gun as it exploded. The bullet, deflected in the instant of firing, smashed upward into Sam Kettleman's thigh and the big man went down.

Lightning-quick, his hand clamped on the other six-gun. The bartender, with a furtive reach under the bar, hurled a bottle. Steele saw it coming from a corner of an eye. He ducked. Whoop Tucker, howling profanity, whirled and whizzed a fist to Steele's face.

The sheriff took the blow glancingly on a cheek. He gun-walloped. He was rewarded by the solid thump of a Colt barrel on Tucker's head. He grabbed his half-stunned man around the middle and rushed for the street.

Two shots roared almost together. One, from somewhere in back of the saloon, shattered a hanging oil lamp. The place was immersed in inky darkness.

The other shot streaked from the floor, where Kettleman slumped. It spotlighted Shorty in powder flame. The bullet struck the louvers of the batwing door, under the little deputy's arm, which was flattened against it and holding it open.

The Eagle Saloon was a bedlam now. A rush of feet trampled Kettleman. Steele was caught in the jam with his limp burden. The rushing tide of stampeding customers shut him off from Shorty and the outdoors.

The rampage spread to the street. A tower of flame sped the crowd, licking at the heels of the hindmost. A cigarette, dropped in the spreading pool of kerosene from the fallen lamp, had taken hold. Fanned by the draught from the open rear door, the Eagle Saloon became a purgatory, and the cry of "Fire!" sounded through Los Pasos.

CHAPTER V

The Missing Cavvy

REMORSE gnawed at Judge Bertram when full realization dawned that his waspish temper had sent Steele and Shorty on that danger-frought errand to the Robles Ranch.

After a few minutes of riding toward the T Bar T, he halted and faced the Straddlebug.

"This is all wrong, dead wrong!" he blurted. "All the hosses in Arizona Territory ain't worth one Blue Steele!"

The thin man leaned a bony elbow on his saddle horn.

"Then what're we doin' about it, Judge?" he asked quietly.

"This ain't no affair of yores! You mosey on to the ranch."

"Aimin' to light out after the sheriff?"

"No use in that, now that the mule-headed young galoot's got his neck bowed for trouble! I'm goin' to strike out for the Robles place, up through the Squaw Creek cut-off. Mebbe by

smoky ridin' I can get there ahead of him and the little red-headed squirt! I'll head off trouble before it happens. I'll turn Steele back when I'm able to persuade him, positive, that Whoop Tucker ain't there!"

"Ain't the Robles outfit apt to misunderstand yore pious notion?"

"I'm not packin' a gun! Even rascals like them won't crack down on a unarmed man! You mosey on, like I tell yuh."

Whereupon Judge Bertram spurred off across the desert on his quixotic mission. The Straddlebug watched him go with a one-sided smile.

"All heart and no head, that oldtimer is." And then his face sobered. "Seems he didn't reckon on the chance that Tucker *is* at the Robles spread. Like Steele seemed so shore of. In which case, Judge Bertram is headed for a flock of trouble."

He considered this complication for a few moments, then straightened with decision.

"Best way for me to make myself useful is to tip off Steele to the judge's move," he decided.

So he turned down-trail, picked up the tracks of the gelding and the pinto at the ford, and proceeded down along the river at the best speed he could coax out of the bay.

At the narrows, he hauled up. The hoofprints had disappeared in the river. There was a way through the gap for a rider who knew how to avoid the swift, deep channel, but the Straddlebug was a stranger.

He did not hesitate for long though. He braced himself and kneed the horse into the stream.

"I'm leavin' it up to you, Star-face," he said. "And I'm hopin' yuh're surefooted and wiser'n yuh look."

It proved to be a bad gamble when the animal reached the rushing flow between the looming walls of the gap. Stumbling on a smooth, slippery boulder it fell. Struggling to rise, it was borne into midstream. Floundering clear, the Straddlebug managed to keep afloat. He saw the horse go down, lashing frantically with its forelegs.

The man bobbed like a chip through a riffle. He kept afloat, but was at the whim of the current which presently cast him into an eddy. A few strokes brought him into a shallows where his feet touched. He waded ashore and flung himself, spent and gasping, on the bank.

But it was on the bank opposite the Robles Ranch. Between him and Steele was the river.

THE Straddlebug reproached himself bitterly.

"A fine time I'll have convincin' anybody I savvy hosses now! Losin' one the first crack out of the box!"

He pulled off his boots and emptied them. He stripped off his clothes and dried them in the blazing sun. And as he waited for the quick process of desert evaporation, he determined to make an effort to join Steele and Shorty, rather than plod back to Painted Post.

He dressed and went on through the gap. It was slow travel. His strength was sapped by the heat. It compelled him to stop often.

He finally emerged onto open ground. Up the slope, he saw the clump of trees that marked the Robles place. He glimpsed stretches of the trail that led up from the river. As he watched, he saw Steele and Shorty emerge from the draw and make their cautious approach to the ranch.

Then came faint blobs of sound. Guns! He writhed with his helplessness. Farther below, he saw where the river dwindled, and headed for the bottomlands with a rush. It was a good two miles, down there and up the slope to the scene of trouble. But there was a bare chance that he could reach it in time to be of some use.

He was fighting his way through the chaparral when he saw a lone rider dashing down to the river flats, from the direction of the ranch. Recogni-

tion was swift. Whoop Tucker was making a getaway! He had eluded Steele! The capture of that wrangler meant everything. The Straddlebug started a breathless run, but Tucker crossed the river well below him. The Straddlebug saw him loping over a rise, headed in the direction of Los Pasos.

One of the strangest chases in the Southwest history ensued. On blistered feet the Straddlebug made crawling progress, through those miles of desert heat, unaware that Steele and Shorty were following, but had halted in that boulder shade, awaiting nightfall before their descent on Los Pasos.

The Straddlebug was still on his way when the two lawmen finally reached Los Pasos. And then came the fire at the Eagle Saloon. The jammed exit to the street left Steele trapped in there with his prisoner. Seconds counted. Not for long could flesh and blood endure that heat. Steele fought his way through smoke and searing flame, to the rear doorway, half-dragging Whoop Tucker with him.

The fresh air revived the gun-walloped wrangler. Steele was prepared for that. A few forceful twists and he had Tucker's wrist trussed at his back with a short length of wire he had picked up along the trail.

"Painted Post handcuffs, them are," he told his captive. "The harder yuh pull, the deeper they cut. Better start takin' orders now, hombre. Or else get yore head bumped on a Colt barrel again."

Whoop Tucker stifled a curse with an effort.

"Here's a proposition, Steele, damn yuh!" he rasped "Me or old Bertram's hosses—which'd yuh rather haze back to yore bailiwick?"

Steele managed to keep the surprised interest out of his voice.

"Me, I been counting on both," he bluffed.

"The cavvy'll be across the Border while yuh're rasslin' me back to Painted Post!"

ANY prodding question now would reveal Steele's blissful ignorance of the whereabouts of the stolen animals. Whereupon Tucker would shut up like a clam.

While Blue Steele racked his ingenious brain for some artful reply, he shoved his captive away from the back of the saloon. The whole interior was ablaze now. Smoke billowed through the roof. The heat swept through the open rear doorway.

He got Tucker over to the edge of a crumbly sandbank to a patch of willows.

The gelding and pinto were tied there. But where was Shorty?

"You won't be herding that cavvy, and neither will Sam Kettleman or his *companero* with the bum arm," he said.

Perhaps this would draw Tucker out. Fetch a boast from him that would give a clue. But before Whoop Tucker could speak, a vague figure dashed around the burning saloon. A pause for a long breath at the doorway, and he made a suicidal dive inside.

Barely in time, Steele shouted.

Shorty halted and whirled, the freckles on his pale face standing out like gold dollars.

"Sheriff!" he screeched.

He scuttled away from the holocaust and reached Steele's elbow all a-tremble.

"Good gravy!" he babbled. "I—I was plumb certain yuh got caught in there!" He was almost in tears. "I—I feel like prayin'!"

Steele whacked him on the back. His own heart was full at that exhibition of selfless devotion that he had witnessed.

"Mr. Tucker, here," he elucidated, "jest mentioned swappin' his hide for the judge's livestock. And I was about to tell him that when we got them hosses over the boundary into Indian

County, we might consider his proposition."

He tried to signal the little deputy to chip in to this game of bluff. But Shorty missed his wink.

"Where at are the hosses?" he blurted.

Tucker made a scornful sound with his lips.

"Pullin' a windy on me, huh, Steele? I ain't tellin' nothin' now! Unless yuh unwrap this blasted wire and—"

A corner of the saloon roof caved in with a muffled roar and a shower of sparks. Flames shot through the opening, sending a wide radiance over the town. On the flats below the bank where they stood, beside the dry river bed, hoof sounds came. Bathed in the weird fire glow, Steele and Shorty saw horses streaking out of a small, round corral.

"The T Bar T cavvy!" shrieked Shorty.

Two riders flanked the running herd. Whoop Tucker flung himself stubbornly on the ground.

"If yuh want 'em, yuh better hustle!" he shouted.

Something had to be decided fast. The sheriff and Shorty could not recapture the horses with a balky captive on their hands.

In this spellbound instant, a sliver-thin man leaped suddenly into sight in front of the animals. They swerved. A flanking rider dashed in, rough-reining his horse on its hind legs, but too late to escape a streak of gun flame from the hand of the man afoot.

The rustler plunged from saddle. The man on the ground, with a leaping run, made a spectacular dive into that empty saddle and got the reins.

"The Straddlebug!" s c r e e c h e d Shorty.

WHOOP TUCKER scrambled to his feet, face aghast, and in time to see the thin man clash with the surviving rustler. They swapped lead over the backs of the horse herd. Three times the Straddlebug lanced out with that borrowed .45, then he turned to the other rider, who was reeling and grabbing for leather.

Before the last shot sounded, Shorty was on the pinto and streaking into it. He met the hit man head-on and finished the job with one blast of his own gun.

Those shots, near as they were, could hardly have been heard by the clamoring mob in front of the burning saloon. Without opposition or interference, Steele and Shorty got Tucker onto that other riderless horse and wired one foot to a stirrup.

The fire was spreading in ramshackle Los Pasos as they crossed a ridge with Judge Bertram's horses in front of them, hitting for the home range. Whoop Tucker, hemmed in between the two lawmen, cursed at every jump. His game was up and he knew it.

Out a mile, they slowed down and the Straddlebug told his story.

"I hit that dirty little burg about dark, tailin' this lobo, Tucker. Then I seen the slickears in that hideaway corral on the flat and I glued my attention on them, waitin' my chance, hopin' I was still man enough to steal 'em back, hellaroo style."

"Yuh've got yoreself a lifetime job on the T Bar T, pardner," Steele assured him.

"Pervidin' "—the Straddlebug sighed wearily—"that Judge Bertram wasn't killed by them wallopers at the Robles Ranch."

They drove the horses over the Caliente ridge, south of the river, without crossing it, so avoiding the perilous gap. At dawn they reached Painted Post.

And there a final surprise awaited them. A tousled head poked out of the jail office. Then Judge Bertram, all in one hunk, stepped out before their relieved gaze, and came running.

He helped them get the horses into the feed corral, and when the gate bars were up he perched on the top

(Concluded on page 81)

Editor Dickens Plans to Save Younkers from Gambling—and Tangles With Old Experts at the Game of Ambushing!

The figure was younger, thinner, armed with a shotgun

COLD TYPE, HOT LEAD

By JAMES W. EGAN

Author of "Hell and Hot Lead," "Killer's Appetite," etc.

THE man slammed into the small front room that served as editorial and business office of the Aladdin *Weekly Lamp.* A big man, coarse-featured, he had a thick, drooping brown mustache and unpleasant pale eyes. Outlined under his knee-length black coat, at one hip, was a sagging bulge.

Chet Dickens looked up from his

seat behind a long, flat table, paper-strewn. Some ink from the pen in his right hand had stained his strong fingers. Possibly twenty-five years of age, he was tall, lean, sandy-haired, deeply bronzed. His two hazel-gray eyes calmly surveyed the intruder.

"Yes?" asked Chet Dickens, without rising.

The big man jerked a folded newspaper from a pocket of the black coat, slapped it down on the cluttered table.

"You wrote this here piece in yore paper?" The tone was harsh. "This piece about the Oasis?"

The four-page weekly had been turned inside out, so the second page's editorial column was uppermost. The blunt forefinger indicated an item headed in small type:

No Place for Minors

Chet Dickens shoved his inky pen into a coil-spring holder.

"I write all of the *Lamp's* editorials," he said, still calm.

"Yeah? Well, yuh better not print no more pieces like this!" snarled the big man. "You only been in Aladdin three or four weeks, cowboy, runnin' this here rag. If yuh wanta keep on runnin' it don't go stickin' yore nose into our business!"

A muscle worked in Dickens' bronzed jaw. His voice sharpened.

"Who are yuh, anyhow? Yuh're not Margetts, the owner of the Oasis. He's been pointed out to me."

"I'm Ase Lycomb," the intruder growled. "I got a part interest in the business, an' yuh'll find I'm a bad jasper to fool with. The Oasis is the leadin' amusement center in this here town, an' we'll run it without no advice from you. See?"

Chet Dickens arose abruptly to his full six feet of lean litheness.

"Reckon I do, Lycomb. Now I want you to understand me. Shore I been in Aladdin less than a month, but that's long enough to know the Oasis ain't no decent or safe place for younkers. Boys shouldn't go there to drink an' gamble an' get into all kinds of trouble. Till you an' yore pardners stop it, or the authorities take action, the *Lamp* is goin' right after yuh. Good mornin', Lycomb!"

"Why, you—" Ase Lycomb blustered. His right hand swept back the long coat, revealing the sagging bulge at his hip to be a holstered forty-five. He gripped the butt.

"I shore wouldn't, Lycomb," said Chet Dickens.

THE muscle worked in Dickens' jaw. Far back in the hazel-gray eyes a tiny blaze was igniting. Still fingering the forty-five, Ase Lycomb let his gaze drift to the rear wall. Suspended from a hook was a gun-belt holding a stag-handled revolver.

"Mebbe yuh better start wearin' that iron, jasper," Lycomb advised. "Yuh might be needin' it some day, pronto."

"Whenever I gotta wear it, I will," Dickens replied steadily. "Good mornin', Lycomb."

His straight glance locked with that of the older, burlier man. The pale eyes were first to fall. With a profane croak, Ase Lycomb spun on his heel and slammed out of the editorial sanctum.

A dry chuckle drew Chet Dickens' attention. Standing in the open doorway to the larger back room, which housed the ancient press, type cases and other equipment, was Yavapai Yelm, the veteran printer who made up one-third of the *Lamp's* working staff.

"Reckon mebbe yuh ain't so easy to bluff as Ase figgered, Chet." Gray-haired, gangling and stoop-shouldered, the old printer grinned and shuffled into the front office.

"Who is he, Yavapai? A hombre who'd like to be tough?"

"Oh, he's in with Margetts at the Oasis. Supposed to be a purty good gun-fighter, they say." Yavapai Yelm pulled a sizable slab of chewing tobacco from his overalls, bit into it. "He probably scared the tarnation fits

outa yore Uncle Ed. The old man wasn't no hand to go raisin' hob."

"The Oasis may be the biggest resort in Aladdin, but it's shore one foul dive." Dickens' eyes snapped. "I aim to raise hob, an' keep on raisin' it, till they stop preyin' on minors."

"Well, they ain't a advertiser, Chet," the veteran grunted. "Never took no space even when yore uncle was runnin' the *Lamp*. Course old Ed never did like the Oasis, but he didn't stir up no ruckuses with the outfit behind it."

"I don't want their advertisin', Yavapai." The younger man picked up a steepled hat. "That reminds me, I gotta talk to Sam Orton about his space in the next issue. Anything Aunt Clara might be wantin' for dinner? I can get it at the store."

"Don't recollect nothin', Chet." Yelm spat accurately into a lopsided brass cuspidor.

"All right, you look after the shop. When Bubbles gets back, tell him to be shore to get them extra papers for Coconino down to the depot in time for the noon train."

Out of doors, the fall air was faintly chill. Swinging along the weathered board sidewalk, Dickens thought of Ase Lycomb's blustering invasion. Then he let his mind go back to the circumstances that had made him editor and publisher of the single weekly newspaper in this small Arizona town.

Two months ago he had been hazing beef for a big cattle outfit down on the Border. Then Ed Flagg, his bachelor uncle and sole owner of the *Weekly Lamp*, had died of a sudden heart attack. His will left the newspaper and a modest sum of money to the sandy-haired cowboy, with the urgent request that Chet continue publication of the *Lamp*.

Flagg's heir wasn't lacking in editorial experience. For several years during his adolescence he had assisted his uncle in getting out a larger weekly in Coconino, the county seat. When Flagg transfered his interests to Aladdin, Chet Dickens found a job punching cows. The old man didn't really need him, and he liked the healthy, though hard work in the open.

Now Flagg's death had brought Dickens in from the range. Moreover, he was firmly resolved to publish a paper which would live up to the slogan his uncle had written for the four-page *Lamp:* "Lighted by the Truth."

CHET DICKENS turned a corner. Across the unevenly rutted street loomed the wide front of the Aladdin Mercantile Company. Sam Orton, proprietor of the big store, was a steady advertiser in the *Lamp*. Orton was waiting on a woman customer when Dickens entered. Bob Page, his youthful clerk, came forward.

"Somethin' I can do for yuh, Chet, or yuh wanta see Sam?"

"I'd like to talk to Sam soon's he's free," Dickens said. "But you can do something for me, Bob. Sell me a tin of that Dixie pipe tobacco." Paying for his purchase, the cowboy editor looked the clerk in the eye. "There's something you should do for yoreself, Bob." His voice was low, friendly. "Stay outa them poker games at the Oasis. Yuh're to young to buck up against the gun-totin' tinhorns who hang around there."

Bob Page flushed. He was a slim youth, not more than eighteen years of age, with a rather pale, weak face. Beneath his eyes were dark rings that seemed unnatural for one so young.

"Why shouldn't I play there?" he asked sulkily. "I ain't been doin' bad. Last night I won more'n a week's wages playin' stud. I'll never get rich workin' for Sam on what he pays me. Anyhow, plenty of boys younger'n me are in the Oasis every night."

Before Chet Dickens could say anything further, Sam Orton hobbled up. The merchant was a gruff, bald man of sixty-odd, reputedly somewhat tight-fisted, and bothered by rheumatism in his left leg.

"Howdy, Chet," Orton hailed. "Let's go back to the office. I'm figuring on a special sale next week, and I'll need a good display. Bob, get them groceries packed for Mrs. Fox! I told yuh to have them ready for delivery half a hour ago."

The scowl the brusque words brought to the youthful clerk's pale face did not escape Dickens. Thoughtfully, he followed the limping storekeeper to the rear of the establishment.

Twenty minutes later, pipe in a corner of his mouth, Chet Dickens returned to the *Lamp's* editorial sanctum. Yavapai Yelm, he found, was not alone. Apparently, awaiting Dickens was an expensively dressed man of forty-five or fifty. Chet's bronzed features tightened. He recognized Clell Margetts, chief owner of the Oasis. Yelm expectorated into the lopsided cuspidor.

"Here's the boss now, Mr. Margetts." The grizzled printer slouched into the back room, remarking over his shoulder: "Bubbles went to the depot with them papers for Coconino 'bout five minutes ago, Chet."

CLELL MARGETTS smiled in greeting. He was of medium height, plump, with a round, smooth-shaven face. His brown eyes seemed frank and amiable, and no bulge sagged from either of his fleshy hips. Unlike Ase Lycomb, he evidently wore no hardware.

"Good mornin', Dickens." His tone was buttery. "I come here to discuss your recent reference to the Oasis."

"So you got a piece to speak, too?" Dickens removed his pipe. "I already had a visit from yore pardner Lycomb, who made some mighty abusive and threatenin' statements."

"I'm right sorry, Dickens," said the other. "Of course, yore editorial criticized our place pretty harsh, an' Ase is a rough, hard man, kinda trigger-tempered. He shouldn'ta threatened yuh, though. I'm shore the matter can be palavered without no talk of violence."

"I wasn't scared by Lycomb's threats, Margetts." Chet began refilling his pipe from the tin of Dixie tobacco Bob Page had sold him. "An' I meant what I said in last week's *Lamp*. Yore resort ain't no fit place for Aladdin's minors—or for its grown-ups, either. But it's young boys from fifteen to eighteen years old I'm fightin' about. Why do yuh encourage 'em to drink and gamble in the Oasis?"

"Not many boys of the ages yuh mention are able to afford the pleasures of our place, Mr. Dickens." Clell Margetts remained suave. "Most of our customers are old enough to know what they're doin', and they got the money to do it with. If they wanta spend it with us, that ain't for us to argue with 'em. Yuh see, yuh're a newcomer to Aladdin, Dickens. We been runnin' the Oasis for several years, under license from local officials. Mayor Pangborn and Marshal Newsham ain't findin' nothin' wrong with how we run our resort. They ain't complained. Don't yuh think mebbe yuh're gettin' off on the wrong foot?"

"What suits the mayor an' the marshal don't necessarily suit all the citizens, Margetts—or me. Mebbe I am a newcomer, but I been in town long enough to listen to a heap of respectable men and women who don't like the way yore place's run. An' they don't like how local officials let it run."

"There's bluenoses in every community," argued the plump man. "Most people want an open town, and Mayor Pangborn knows it. Dickens, I plumb think yuh're gettin' off on the wrong foot. It won't help yore paper to buck the whole town."

"The *Lamp* has only one policy—to print the truth." Chet's teeth clamped on his pipe stem. "I never wrote nothin' but the truth about yore hell-hole, Margetts. I aim to keep on writin' it."

Clell Margetts shook his head. "Not a hell-hole, Dickens. The Oasis is a

high-toned amusement emporium. I'd shore like folks in Aladdin who hold narrow views about it to be enlightened. Now there ain't no better way to enlighten folks than advertisin'. What's yore terms for a quarter of a page each week, Dickens? I'm willin' to sign a year's contract for the space—an' pay in advance!"

Dickens put his pipe down.

"Yuh're not dealin' with some political coyote now, Margetts. I don't take no bribes!" Now I reckon yuh can get out of here, yuh oily crook. Yore slick talk won't work no better than the threats of yore gun-totin' pard, Ase Lycomb."

For a brief instant stark venom flared in the mock-mild eyes of Clell Margetts. Yet, when he spoke, his voice was smoothly controlled

"I'm afraid yuh're a mighty pore young business man. Good day, Dickens."

SCARCELY was the plump resort owner gone than a still more plump youth of fifteen came panting inside. "Bubbles" Wedge, juvenile member of Dickens' staff, had attained to amazingly balloonlike girth for a boy his age.

"Train was late this noon, Chet," he said breathlessly. "Gosh, that was Margetts, wasn't it? Is he mad about the piece in the paper? I never been in the Oasis yet—heck?"

"Don't ever let me catch yuh there, either, or I'll have yore ma whip the fat off yore hide, Bubbles!" Dickens warned. "You stick around the shop till Yavapai and me come back from dinner."

As they strode to the cottage where he roomed and boarded with the gangling printer's widowed aunt, Chet Dickens' hazel-gray eyes were thoughtful.

"Mebbe Margetts don't pack a gun, Yavapai," he said. "But I got an idea he's a more dangerous rascal than Ase Lycomb."

"He shore is one slick article," Yavapai Yelm spat. "Been runnin' the Oasis to suit hisself so long, he figgers he can get away with just about anythin'. Reckon Mayor Pangborn and Bail Newsham is in cahoots with him. Decent folks oughta back yuh in this, Chet. If I had kids of my own, I shore wouldn't want 'em hellin' in the Oasis."

"Younkers like Bob Page." Dickens frowned. "I tried to put a flea in his ear today, but I reckon it wasn't no use. Bob's been playing poker at the Oasis, so he thinks he can make money faster by gamblin' than clerkin' in the store."

"Well, Sam Orton shore don't overpay him. Bob gets mebbe ten or twelve dollars a week, and him and his mother has to live on it. There's just the two of them, and Mrs. Page is sickly and down in her bed half the time. Wonder whether—"

The veteran paused to eject another brown stream before going on.

"Bob's a kinda funny kid, Chet. Weak in some ways, but he thinks a heap of his ma. For quite a spell Doc McFee has a idea Mrs. Page oughta go to a hospital in Tucson for special treatments. She might have to stay a coupla months, and it'd cost considerable—more'n Bob can earn in years at Orton's store. You reckon mebbe he's got some loco notion he can win enough money gamblin' to ship his ma to Tucson for them hospital treatments?"

"That could be it, Yavapai." Dickens' frown deepened. "Like yuh say, though, it's a loco notion. There ain't nobody can beat the games Margetts and his crew put on. It shore ain't likely to be done by boys of eighteen. If Bob is countin' on helpin' his sick ma that way, he's headin' fast for trouble."

LESS than a week later, Chet Dickens was recalling grimly these words. In the editorial office of the *Lamp* he sat facing bald Sam Orton and Dr. Will McFee, the white-whis-

kered local medico. Hovering back of the lean, sandy-haired editor was Yavapai Yelm's stoop-shouldered figure.

"Something's gotta be done, Dickens!" Dr. McFee stated vehemently. "I never heard of a more cold-blooded killing!"

The muscle was working in Dickens' bronzed jaw as he interrupted.

"The *Lamp* will do somethin', Doc. The murder of Bob Page means Margetts and his hell-hole have gotta go!"

Just a few hours previously, in a midnight poker game at the Oasis, Orton's youthful clerk had been shot to death by a house gambler known as "Chip" Reviere. The stakes in the fatal game had been nearly a thousand dollars in cash. All the players save Page and Reviere had dropped out prior to the final showdown.

The house gambler's hand won the big pot, in which was more than four hundred dollars bet by young Page. According to bystanders, the loser had leaped to his feet, shouting that Reviere was a cheat. He charged Riviere, who was dealer, with slipping two kings from the bottom of the deck in filling out his hand.

Witnesses disagreed as to whether or not Page had attempted to draw a weapon, although a gun later was found on him. At any rate, the Oasis employe whipped out a revolver and shot the youngster through the heart. He then scooped up the money on the table and bolted from the resort.

Marshal Bail Newsham did not get to the scene until several minutes later. He learned that Page's slayer had secured a mount and fled into the hills. Sheriff Boyne's office at Coconino had been notified, posses formed. But Reviere had so long a start that his apprehension was doubtful.

Yavapai Yelm shifted a chew of tobacco in his cheek.

"Where did Bob get all the money he was bettin'?" he asked.

"From the store safe," Sam Orton sighed heavily. "I had five hundred dollars in it. Bob let hisself in the back way last night, opened the safe and took every cent to gamble with. I knew somethin' had been wrong with the boy lately, but I never looked for him to turn thief. It was my money he lost to Margetts' murderin' house man —and Reviere skipped with it."

"Bob lost more'n yore money, Sam," Chet Dickens said quietly. "He lost his life. He was nothin' but a kid, an' he was gunned by a crooked gambler. That is, Reviere is crooked if Bob really caught him cheatin'."

"Of course it was true!" snapped the doctor. "That's why Reviere killed him. I don't believe that Bob tried to draw a gun. Where'd he get a gun from? He never had one. I bet it was planted on him by one of Margetts' fast tinhorns."

DICKENS stared down at the cluttered table.

"I understand Margetts wasn't around when the shootin' happened."

"He went home a few minutes before, they say," Orton gruffly responded. "He left Ase Lycomb to close up."

"Another gunman!" Indignation still gripped Dr. McFee. "I didn't hear that he tried to stop Reviere's getaway. That poor, misguided kid! I'm not excusing Bob for stealing your money, Sam, or gambling with it I admit he did wrong. But he wanted to get enough money to send his mother to Tucson so she would have a chance to get well. He was foolish, and should have known better, but, after all, he was only a weak boy.

"A weak boy," Dickens repeated somberly. "What effect will this have on his ma, Doc? Does she know Bob is dead?"

The physician nodded. "Yes, she knows. The shock put her in bed, and her condition is very serious. I'm not sure she's going to survive the blow."

"I wish Bob came to me with his

troubles—asked for a outright loan of the money he needed." Sam Orton looked distressed. "But I reckon it's too late now. All we can do is punish them who is to blame. Go after Margetts and his crowd hard, Chet. Every honest citizen will back yuh up!"

"We're liable to need backin', Sam." Yavapai Yelm spat, wiped his stained lips. "Mebbe gun-backin'."

"It's up to the authorities to enforce the laws, Yavapai," Dickens stated sharply. "I claim Mayor Pangborn and his peace officer has been negligent. I'm goin' after them as well as Margetts. The reg'lar weekly edition of this here paper comes out tomorrow, gents. I promise yuh, we will demand fast an' hot action against the Oasis."

THE pen of the cowboy editor raced busily across sheets of paper most of that day. Yelm first set a news story of the shooting, then picked out type for a special editorial. That editorial was to be boxed in the center of the front page, bordered heavily in black. The jaws of the gangling printer, habitually champing on a tobacco cud, moved faster as he was performing his task. Yet, when the editorial was set and he had rolled and brought the proof to Chet Dickens, Yavapai volunteered no comment. Just as silently, Chet corrected and returned the proof with a steady hand.

Every reader in Aladdin was familiar with the contents of the *Lamp's* front page editorial before twenty-four hours passed. The heading challenged in bold letters, the story in hard words.

CLOSE THIS DIVE!

Elsewhere in this issue of the *Lamp* is an account of the murder of an eighteen-year-old boy, Robert Page, who was killed in a resort of ill repute, the Oasis. He was killed by a gunman gambler employed by the Oasis, now a fugitive from justice.

This boy had no business to be playing cards in the Oasis. He was playing with money that did not belong to him—money taken from his employer's safe, in foolish belief he could cope with professional card-sharps of dubious honesty. He was weak. But in his youth and weakness he was made the mark of ruthless buzzards, who too long have been permitted to lead astray and corrupt those of tender years.

This boy would not have gambled with stolen money, would not have been shot to death, had he not been encouraged, along with other minors even younger, to drink and play cards at the Oasis, to consort with loose and unsavory characters.

The Oasis is operated by Clell Margetts, under license, so he claims, from local authorities.

This newspaper recently protested that his resort was no fit place for minors, demanded that immature boys be kept out.

The editorial protest drew both threats and the offer of a subtle bribe, but neither Margetts nor his associates showed any disposition to correct conditions.

The *Lamp's* editor was informed that Mayor Caleb Pangborn and Marshal Bail Newsham were satisfied with the way the Oasis is operated.

Now this boy, Robert Page, is dead—murdered!

Equally culpable with Margetts and his associates in the Oasis are Mayor Pangborn and Marshal Newsham, whose duty it is to uphold and enforce the laws of Aladdin.

Life cannot be restored to the young victim, Robert Page, nor the broken heart of his ailing mother mended.

But other minors, other mere boys, must not fall prey to the same unhappy fate, to the same unscrupulous parasites.

The Oasis is a moral blot upon Aladdin, a stench in the nostrils of all good citizens.

The *Lamp* calls upon the authorities to close this hell-hole, to chase out these preying buzzards, to check this ruination of Aladdin's youth. Unless local officials take prompt action, citizens of Aladdin may be forced to take measures of their own. Aladdin will be kept a decent town for youngsters to grow up in.

This dive, the Oasis, must be closed at once!

The last of the papers was finally run off the creaking old press and given to Bubbles Wedge for delivery. Yavapai Yelm thrust a grimy hand into an overall pocket, pulled forth his omnipresent slab of tobacco, and bit into it. He gazed soberly at Dickens, who was standing by the press.

"That was a mighty strong piece,

Chet. Reckon it's gonna raise hob. You'll be hearin' from all quarters, includin' Margetts."

"That's just what I aimed to do, Yavapai." Dickens' bronzed features were stony. "Bob Page's killin' called for hard writin'. Hard writin' smokes sidewinders into the open. After that, I don't know—but I'm stickin'."

"Well, Margetts ain't gonna let hisself be run outa town if he can help it. No tellin' what he'll do, Chet."

"I know that much, anyhow. Just not to help him any, I'm movin' my blankets in here tonight. The press is our real weapon, an' I ain't leavin' the shop unguarded."

"Good idea," grunted the printer. "I can stick around, too, in case you need me. I'll fetch my Win— Here comes Doc McFee and Sam Orton. Reckon they seen yore piece."

BEFORE Chet Dickens could more than greet the physician and the merchant, two other callers invaded the *Lamp* office. Mayor Caleb Pangborn, spare and wizened, was clutching a still damp newspaper. His shrunken visage was black with anger. Bail Newsham, the burly, red-faced marshal, glowered with equal resentment.

"Look here, yuh young upstart!" exploded the mayor. "How do yuh get the idiocy to print this kinda piece? You ain't even been in Aladdin long enough to pay taxes, an' here yuh're hollerin' about me not upholdin' the law! Clell Margetts got a license to run the Oasis. What happened to young Page wasn't nobody's fault but his own."

"If he wasn't gunned, he'da been in jail right this minute," Newsham snarled. "Him gamblin' with stolen money, an'—"

"It was my money he took, Bail," interrupted Sam Orton. "I'da said whether Bob would go to jail."

"Mebbe yuh coulda jailed him, Marshal," Dickens said, ignoring the choleric Pangborn. "That's something you ain't done with his murderer. Why ain't yuh out roundin' up Chip Reviere? That's yore job—to capture Bob Page's murderer."

"I just got back with a dog-tired posse," Newsham defended sullenly. "Sheriff Boyne's still huntin' Reviere. He's got more men, and it's a job for county lawmen now."

"Lemme talk to him, Bail!" fumed the mayor. "Young man—"

"Talk ain't what we want from you, Mayor Pangborn," Chet cut in. "We want action. License or no license, the Oasis has been runnin' unlawful, an' it's a menace to Aladdin's youth. Murder was committed there. When yuh gonna close that hell-hole?"

"I ain't closin' up no place on yore sayso!"

Caleb Pangborn brandished the newspaper in his fist.

"Then it's high time we got officials who'll enforce the law, gents." Dickens turned to Orton and Dr. McFee. "If the mayor won't do his duty, the *Lamp* aims to demand his recall."

His Honor shook with rage. "We don't want no meddlers here!" he roared.

"You ought to be recalled!" Dr. McFee retorted savagely. "And, by hell, we can recall you, you jimsonweed politician!"

As Sam Orton was about to add his bit, Marshal Newsham seized the arm of the sputtering Pangborn.

"Come on, Cale," he urged. "We'll leave Clell deal with this here newspaper hombre."

His expression stormy, the white-haired doctor watched them exit.

"Fine pair of polecats," he ripped out. "Throw them both out of office—that's the ticket. Pangborn's played Margetts' game too long. What does he care if Bob Page is dead, that the boy's mother may not live through another night?"

"Is Mrs. Page that bad?" Orton asked in dismay. He whirled toward Dickens. "Say, Chet, mebbe we oughta fetch Sheriff Tim Boyne here from

Coconino and let him clean things up."

"If the local authorities refuse to act—" Dickens began, but he did not finish.

Through the streaky front window he saw two men crossing the street toward the *Lamp*. One was plump Clell Margetts. The other was Ase Lycomb.

MARGETTS led the way into the newspaper office. His mock-mild brown eyes, lacking their false amiability today, darted from the bronzed editor to the grim faces of Orton and Dr. McFee. Behind him bulked Lycomb, whose right hand was hovering sinisterly near his hip.

Clell Margetts addressed the storekeeper.

"Glad yuh're here, Orton. I wanta tell yuh how sorry I am about this whole business. The money Page gambled with was stolen from yuh, so I aim to pay yuh back. I'm also ready to pay for young Page's burial expenses. If I'da been there, I don't think the argument woulda ended fatal, though I'm shore Chip Reviere thought he was shootin' in self-defense."

"Self-defense, hell!" burst from Dr. McFee.

Offering him no response, Margetts shuttled his gaze back to Chet.

"I won't waste any words on you, Dickens," he said. "Aladdin has got too small for both of us, so I'm gonna give yuh a choice."

Dickens removed his pipe. "Yeah?" he commented.

"I know a old newspaper man in Tucson," Margetts continued smoothly. "He would like to own a weekly just like this, but ain't got no money. I'm willin' to lend it to him. He'll give yuh two thousand dollars in gold for the Aladdin *Lamp* and the plant here. Yuh got 'til tomorrow night to make up yore mind."

Chet started filling his pipe with great care.

"An' supposin' I don't feel like sellin' the *Lamp?*" he asked quietly.

Big Ase Lycomb shoved forward.

"You sell, or get outa town by tomorrer night, cowboy!" he rasped.

"If yuh're still here after tomorrer, pack iron, 'cause I'll draw on yuh first time we meet. Sell out or get gunned out!"

"Oh, no he won't!" Dr. McFee intervened hotly. "You can't get away with this, Margetts. Every decent citizen is behind Dickens. Try to carry out your threat, and I'll organize enough men to march on the Oasis and reduce it to kindling!"

Clell Margetts checked Lycomb, who was about to break into blustering speech.

"Go ahead and organize 'em, Doc." The brown eyes were suddenly hard and glinting. "I can hire me a crew of guns to protect my property, and I'll have the sanction of the authorities. Mob violence against the Oasis is gonna end up in bloodshed. I'm warnin' yuh!"

Chet Dickens set his pipe down.

"He's right, Doc. He can protect his property from an organized attack I don't want to see civil war in Aladdin, 'cause that'll mean sheddin' the blood of its citizens, without doin' no good. We can't let that happen." For a moment he was silent, then he resumed: "This is my own problem, an' I aim to settle it as such. Yuh'll have my answer by noon tomorrer, Margetts. At five minutes to twelve I'll be at the Oasis—alone. You an' Lycomb wait for me there, likewise alone. I'm choosin' a time of day when trade is slack. Is that agreeable to yuh?"

A cold smile flickered across Margetts' face.

"We'll be expectin' yuh, Dickens. Ase an' me'll be alone, exceptin' the bartender on early duty. He'll have orders not to interfere in any way, an' there won't be no customers."

"Yuh better come with the right answer," Lycomb growled.

After the pair from the Oasis had departed, Dr. McFee and Sam Orton stared curiously at the *Lamp's* editor.

"You ain't sellin' out, Chet!" demanded the merchant.

"No." Dickens' jaw hardened. "I ain't sellin' out, Sam. I just named the time and place for a showdown between them and me. So far I've fought with cold type. If I gotta, I can carry on with hot lead. I'll be wearin' iron when I walk into the Oasis tomorrer, gents."

"You can't trust those buzzards!" expostulated Dr. McFee. "They won't fight fair. Don't go there alone!"

"Yuh heard Margetts accept my terms, Doc," Chet said. "By takin' 'em, they've kinda tied their own hands. Anyhow, if I go down it still won't be too late for the citizens to act. But it will be if we prod Margetts into importin' a crew of gunnies."

Dickens remained adamant to further argument, nor was he to be dissuaded afterward by Yavapai Yelm. Finally, grumbling, the old printer went home and returned with a Winchester rifle. But nothing disturbed the vigil kept that night over the shop.

At ten minutes to twelve the following forenoon, Chet Dickens left the *Lamp,* unaccompanied. The stag-handled gun which had hung upon the office wall was buckled around his waist. Behind stayed Yelm, troubled of mien, and fat Bubbles Wedge, whose usually busy tongue for once was not chattering.

The fall day was darkly drab, with lowering clouds in the sky. Chet's own bronzed features were overcast. Word had come early in the morning of the passing of Bob Page's mother—one more debit item against the Oasis. The street in front of the garishly fronted amusement emporium was deserted, perhaps significantly.

Dickens headed directly for the batwing entrance, parted the swinging doors. The resort interior, long, high-ceilinged, barnlike, was brilliantly alight, contrasting with the outer gloom. Every hanging oil lamp in the place seemed to be burning.

Chet halted a few feet inside the entrance, but cautiously keeping to one side of it. He could see two men. Behind the bar a whitecoated attendant mopped the polished surface nervously. Leaning against the mahogany, at the far end, was Ase Lycomb.

A row of booths ran the length of one side. The curtains had been drawn back to show that the stalls were empty. The various card tables were bare, other gambling equipment covered, the piano closed on its small stand.

At the rear of the long rectangular

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NOW ON SALE AT ALL STANDS

room a balcony jutted, reached by a narrow stairway. The private office of Clell Margetts was on this ledge, but its glass-paneled door was shut. The plump director of the Oasis was nowhere in view.

Lycomb's slouching bulk straightened. The big man was coatless, his holstered forty-five dangling ominously at the left side. He fastened his pale eyes upon the editor of the *Lamp*. The bartender continued his jerky mopping. Chet met the pale eyes with cool steadiness, although his nerves were tingling.

"I'm here, Lycomb," he said. "Alone."

The coarse features of Ase Lycomb twisted.

"Well?" he asked harshly.

"I ain't sellin'—or leavin' town." Chet's alert gaze was intent on the big man's hands. "An' I'm packin' iron, Lycomb."

Ase Lycomb didn't move his hands. Slowly, he turned his body until he faced the balcony, his back toward Dickens.

"Clell!" he shouted.

Then, with snaky swiftness, Lycomb pivoted. The forty-five had leaped from leather to his hand. Even as he wheeled, the weapon was roaring.

Chet had not missed the telltale movement of Lycomb's right hand. His own gun streaked forth, blazed at the same instant with the other's heavy boom.

In the swirls of smoke, Dickens stood untouched. Ase Lycomb was down, collapsed to the floor by the slug which had smashed his right shoulder. The forty-five had clattered from his grasp. He lay groaning and cursing.

Some premonitory sense prompted Chet to jerk his eyes abruptly to the balcony. The door to the private office whipped open, but it wasn't Clell Margetts who bolted forth. The figure was younger, thinner, armed with a double-barreled shotgun.

Chet barely had time for a desperate sideward jump before the weapon blasted. Twin loads of buckshot whistled through the space he had just vacated, tore into the flooring. He felt the burn of pellets along his right hip and leg.

Eyes aflame, Chet flung up the stag-handled gun. Two quick shots, and the thin figure tumbled from the ledge. His hurtling body struck the floor a dozen feet below with bone-breaking impact. He lay in a crumpled heap and did not stir again.

Already, Chet had identified the shotgun assassin. He was Chip Reviere, wanted killer of Bob Page! How he came to be here was a question that at the moment was unanswerable.

The muscle in his jaw clenching, Dickens waited with raised gun. Out of the corner of an eye he saw the bartender stretching his arms ceilingward. The fellow's face was waxen. From within Clell Margetts' office issued a shaken voice. "I'm comin' down, Dickens, with my hands up. I ain't armed."

Margetts walked out on the balcony, arms above his head. The plump face was pale. It grew paler as its owner descended the narrow, steep stairs with faltering feet. His expression deadly stern, Chet Dickens covered the resort keeper every inch of the way.

"Yuh treacherous devil!" he said in a low, hard voice.

Clell Margetts swayed, seemed to stumble on the last step. One hand clutched at the wooden railing. The other darted inside his coat, whipped forth a stub-nosed derringer! The plump man did it all with lightning speed. Yet fast as he was, Chet was faster. His gun hammered out a sharp barking retort. A scream broke from Margetts' lips as the bullet shattered his wrist. Pain and hate filled the nakedly murderous brown eyes.

"Damn nice shootin'!" came a booming voice from behind Dickens.

Chet's head swung around. Two men had pushed through the batwing entrance to the resort. One, square-faced and heavy-set, wore a star on his chest. Sheriff Tim Boyne, chief lawman of Coconino and the surrounding county, had spoken. His companion was Yavapai Yelm, Winchester in hand.

"Reckon we're a mite late, Sheriff," said the veteran printer. "Looks like Chet's come through against purty tough odds."

"Sam Orton sent me word I was needed right bad, but it shore looks like a lot of my work's been done." The sheriff approached Dickens. "S'pose you tell me what happened, mister editor."

AT NO time during the terse relation of Chet's experience did the officer take his keen old eyes from the wounded Lycomb or his plump chief.

"They figgered on gettin' me any one of two or three ways, and they blame near succeeded, Tim," Dickens wound up. "I don't know how Reviere got here, unless—"

"Harborin' a fugitive, was yuh, Margetts?" rumbled Sheriff Boyne. "I suspicioned yesterday that he doubled back. Or mebbe it was planned that-away all the time. Just one more charge yuh're gonna have to face, Margetts. An' right here and now I'm closin' this hell-hole. For the time bein', I've took over law enforcement in Aladdin. The mayor and Marshal Newsham was notified. I relieved Bail from duty, and I got a notion he ain't never gonna get his job back."

With a faint twinkle in his eye, Boyne regarded Chet.

"You appear to have cleaned out this hell-hole pretty thorough, editor. Howsomever, I'll tend to the rest of the chore. Yore work's finished, exceptin' mebbe to get it wrote up for yore paper."

Yavapai Yelm ferreted out his chewing tobacco.

"Goin' back to the paper, Chet?" he queried slyly. "I figger mebbe we shouldn't let folks wait till our next reg'lar issue with all this big news. We might put out a extry—the first in the hist'ry of the Aladdin *Weekly Lamp*. What do yuh think, Chet?"

"I think," said Chet Dickens, drawn features relaxing, "that you and me will be gettin' busy on that extra right after dinner this noon. I still like cold type betterin' hot lead, exceptin' for them folks who talk back with guns."

PAINTED POST STRADDLEBUG

(Concluded from page 69)

rail and explained his presence in that close-clipped talk of the range.

"Reckon I'm jest a useless old fossil," he rumbled, "and don't deserve no such good luck as this. Up on Squaw Creek, meanderin' over that cut-off, I got myself headed up a blind canyon. By the time I sighted the Robles spread, you and the redhead was makin' tracks from there, Sheriff. With a certain party out ahead—which proved my judgment of character is as bad as my sense of direction."

Steele tossed him the jail cell key.

"Which'll add to yore pleasure in lockin' up Mr. Whoop Tucker," he said. "It'll add to mine and Shorty's to round up Mr. Sam Kettleman and the rest of his coyotes at the Robles Ranch later, if Kettleman ever gets back there, and wasn't plumb burnt up in that fire."

"And when yuh get through at the jail here, Judge," chirped Shorty, linking one arm through Straddlebug's and the other through the sheriff's, "yuh'll know where to find us."

The three of them marched across to Chow Now's and breakfast, and the thin buckaroo knew that he had found a new home range.

Sage Valley Guns

By REEVE WALKER

Author of "Gun Reward," "Two-Gun Tornado," etc.

Marsh hurled himself at the Bar B owner

Surrounded By a Band of Quick-Shooting Coyotes, Buck Marsh Makes a Valiant Break For Freedom!

IT WAS the tenth day that the Flying M outfit had been fighting off the ruthless attack of Les Barton's gunslicks. The thick adobe walls, the stout oak doors and narrow windows made the ranchhouse a veritable fort, but the seige was a grim one. The ordeal they were going

through was clearly visible in their tired eyes and smoke-stained faces as the nine men and the girl faced another dawn.

"I'm hungry!" Fat little "Slim" Ranson uttered the plaintive bleat as he stood at one of the narrow windows, a Winchester ready in his hands. "Ain't we never gonna eat again?"

"Shut up, Slim!" Buck Marsh's voice was grim and commanding. Ever since the attack had started it had been the tall, dark-haired foreman who had been in command. "Don't yuh figger Jill has enough to worry her with the old man wounded and all, without you kicking up a fuss about food?"

"That's just the trouble." Slim Ransom lowered his voice as he spoke and glanced toward the closed door of the first floor bedroom. Jill Martin was taking care of her wounded father in there. "There ain't no food."

"We all know that," said Marsh impatiently. "But you're the only one that's kicking about it."

"Here they come again!" yelled one of the other men at the windows, his eyes fixed on a group of approaching horsemen. "Looks like Les Barton is sending out fresh men to relieve them sidewinders that's been pesterin' us all night."

Marsh frowned. With every hour that passed the situation was growing more and more serious. Barton and his men had started the attacks on the Flying M when the food supplies on the ranch were low. The ranch cook, old Seth Harper, had started for town with one of the big ranch wagons, intending to return with a load of provisions to last through the next two or three months. But Barton and his men had caught and killed Seth and burned the wagon. Those in the ranchhouse had seen the whole thing happen off in the distance.

The roaring of the six-guns and rifles suddenly filled the big living-room with an ear-shattering din as Marsh and the other men went into action. The rain of lead drove Les Barton's men back out of range. Here they halted their horses and discussed the situation.

"Never knew that polecats could ride hosses until we ran up against Barton's outfit," said Slim Ransom. "I'd shore like to smash that hombre's face in. If I could get close enough I'd make him look like a mashed-up pie." The fat little waddy moaned as he reloaded his rifle. "Now what did I want to say anything about pie for! It just makes me all the more hungry."

Buck Marsh found then that his own stomach was feeling empty. The last time any of them had eaten had been early the previous morning, when Jill had made a batch of biscuits. She had used the last bit of flour in the house, and now there was nothing else in the way of food.

The young foreman felt they were fortunate in at least having plenty of water. There was a pump connected with a cistern in the kitchen, and there was no danger of them suffering from thirst. They also had plenty of ammunition to last them for some time, but the food question was constantly growing more serious.

MARSH swung around as he heard the door of the bedroom open. Jill Martin stood there, her face hazy but lovely in the gunsmoke that lingered in the living-room. She was wearing a green house dress that was extremely becoming to her blond beauty.

"How is he this mornin', Jill?" asked Marsh, going to her.

"Better, but he's so weak, Buck." Her voice was low and musical, but her eyes were tired. "He needs nourishment. Buck we've simply got to get food some way."

"I know." Marsh nodded. "I've been tryin' to figger out a plan. Les Barton must have at least twenty men out there surrounding the place." The

young foreman's tone was bitter. "He always has the odds on his side—even to the law."

Jill nodded. She knew exactly what Buck Marsh meant. It was the old story of a range hog who wanted another man's property. Les Barton owned most of Sage Valley, and he had finally decided that he wanted the Flying M property and rangeland also. He had been clever about it. At first he had offered to buy the ranch from Jim Martin, naming a price far below its actual value.

The owner of the Flying M had refused. And immediately after that trouble had started. Cattle from Barton's Bar B outfit were said to be missing, and Barton had reported to the sheriff that rustlers were stealing his stock. He intimated that the Flying M outfit might have something to do with it.

The situation had reached a climax eleven days ago when a number of steers from the Bar B had been found on Martin's range—their brands crudely changed to that of the Flying M.

In sudden anger Les Barton had declared he would wipe out the Flying M outfit, and the ruthless attack on the ranch had started. There was no doubt in Buck Marsh's mind that Barton had ordered his men to plant the apparently stolen cattle on the Flying M so that the Bar B owner would have an excuse to attack.

Old Sheriff Matt Watson was honest but dumb. He had believed Barton's story of the rustling, but had done nothing about it. The lawman had more important things on his mind, for during the past week he had been trying to track down a gang of outlaws who had held up and robbed the Limited and stolen ten thousand dollars from the express car.

"Barton and his men will be expecting us to try and get to town for supplies," Marsh said finally, as he thought things over. "He must realize we're low on food since his men killed Seth." The young foreman's expression became grim. "There's just one thing to do. One of us has to try and get away, and then head for the Bar B."

"What's the good of going to the Bar B?" asked Slim Ranson. The other six men were listening to the conversation during the lull in the firing. "I don't get it, Buck."

"There's bound to be plenty of food at the Bar B," said Marsh. "And I aim to steal all I can of it."

"If you think I'm goin' to let anybody go lookin' for food thataway alone, yuh're crazy," said Slim Ranson, and the fat little man looked all the more hungry. "Shucks, the jaspers what goes to Barton's spread will get a chance to eat in a hurry, won't they?"

"Which sounds like you don't care how long the rest of us starve as long as you get something to eat, Slim," said Jill with a smile. "But I know you don't mean it that way."

"Shore don't, Miss Jill," said Slim. Then impatiently: "Come on, Buck. What are we waitin' for?"

"All right, men," said the foreman. "You all heard the plan. Yore job is to keep Barton's men away while Slim and me saddle up a couple of hosses and get riding."

THE two men made their way to the back of the house. They both knew that the mission on which they were bound meant risking their lives during every moment of the trip, but they took it casually.

Marsh felt it might have been wiser to have made the attempt under the cover of darkness, but they had not decided upon doing it until this morning. To await the coming of another night would only mean those in the ranchhouse would be forced to go hungry just that much longer.

They hastily saddled their horses, as the waddies in the house kept Barton's men extremely busy with a barrage of rifle fire. The men inside were

able to cover all four sides of the ranchhouse, and at present there did not appear to be any of the Bar B men stationed on the south side of the adobe structure.

"Come on, Slim!" shouted Marsh, swinging into the saddle. "Let's go!"

They rode south at a gallop, apparently heading for the mountains five miles away, but actually planning to circle around to the northeast so that they might reach the Bar B ranch.

Trees quickly hid the two riders from the view of any of Barton's men who might have been watching. But there was no way of telling whether they had been spotted by the Bar B gunslicks. It might be that some of Les Barton's killer crew had started in pursuit.

"I'm beginnin' to feel a little like a rabbit that's been put in a corral with a pack of hungry wolves," said Slim. "Whatever happens next ain't gonna be so nice." The stout little waddy chuckled. "Wish they'd put me in that corral. Darn if I wouldn't eat the wolves and the rabbit myownself."

They had slowed their horses down to a brisk walk now. They both realized there was no point in wearing out the animals needlessly by keeping them going at a gallop. An hour later they were approaching the ranch buildings of the Bar B outfit. They halted their mounts as they topped a rise.

"Look!" Marsh exclaimed, pointing to a small group of horsemen down in the valley below. "It's some of Barton's men, and Slim—they've got Jill! They're taking her to the ranch a prisoner!"

"Yuh're right," said Slim. "How did that happen? He looked at the foreman, a dismal expression on his round, fat face. "Yuh figger they cleaned out the Flying M after we left and got the girl, Buck?"

"I don't know," said Marsh grimly, his left hand going to the gun in the holster on his left leg, "but I aim to find out pronto." He started suddenly. "Here comes Les Barton himself," he said, spying a big man riding a pinto. "He's gonna pass right by that clump of cottonwoods down there by the creek. If we could get down there first, mebbe we could sort of reason with that sidewinder."

They had not been seen by any of the riders below as they had halted because they were in the shadow of the branches of some trees on the top of the hill. Now, they circled around and rode down, so that the cottonwood trees were between them and Barton and his men. When they reached the trees Slim unloosed his rope. Marsh nodded.

All unsuspecting, Les Barton rode closer. Slim threw his rope, and the noose caught the hind legs of Barton's pinto. The rope tightened and Barton leaped out of the saddle with catlike grace as he felt his horse falling. Then Marsh came galloping up and flung himself out of the kak just as the Bar B owner got to his feet, his gun drawn. Marsh's leap sent him hurtling against the other man, and they went down in a mad tangle of flying arms and legs.

"Whoopee!" exclaimed Slim, as he slid out of leather and came running to Marsh's aid. "Just like a couple of wildcats!"

The stout little waddy uttered an exclamation of joy as Marsh landed a right hook on Barton's jaw that knocked the ranch owner unconscious. Then Slim became a very busy man. And three minutes later, when Barton opened his eyes, he was neatly bound with Ranson's rope. He was also seated in his own saddle. Marsh had been holding his limp form so that the unconscious man did not fall.

"IF WE was to tell them three men with Jill that if they don't release her pronto this sidewinder gets a bullet in his head, what do you

think would happen, Slim?" asked Marsh grimly.

"Either they'd do like we say, or this jasper would be very dead," said Slim. "Come on, let's try it."

They rode to the Bar B ranch, with Slim riding ahead leading Barton's horse. Buck Marsh followed them, his gun in his left hand. At a word from Marsh the owner of the Bar B shouted to his men and ordered them not to shoot or he would lose his life.

As Marsh rode up beside Barton, holding the pinto's reins with one hand and covering the ranch owner with the other, Slim left them. The three men who had brought the girl in a prisoner, stood waiting for their boss' orders. Slim quickly disappeared around the corner of the Bar B ranch-house.

In a few minutes the stout waddy reappeared, and he was driving a two-horse team hitched to a small ranch wagon that had hastily been filled with provisions. Jill was seated in the back of the wagon, a heavy Colt in her right hand.

"Never mind me!" shouted Barton, suddenly jabbing his spurs into the pinto. "Don't let them get away!"

The horse leaped forward jerking the reins out of Marsh's hand. His gun roared, but the bullet whistled harmlessly by the three men who were clawing at their Colts. One of them fired. His bullet missed Marsh, but killed the foreman's horse. Marsh slid out of the saddle as the animal fell.

"In here, Buck!" cried out Jill, her gun blazing at the three men.

Marsh ran to the wagon with lead flying all about him and climbed into the back. A bullet smacked into a bag of flour, and the white dust left a trail behind the wagon.

Both Marsh and the girl were firing as Slim glanced back over his shoulder and urged the two frightened horses into a gallop. Barton's horse was galloping away in the distance, the bound man still in the saddle.

Before the three Bar B men had a chance to mount their horses the wagon was out of sight around a bend in the road.

"Looks like we got away all right," said Marsh with a sigh of relief. "How did they happen to capture you, Jill?"

"I—I was very foolish," the blond girl said. "I thought that if I went out and pleaded with them, told them that Dad was badly wounded and needed food, they would let me go to town. The men told me I was crazy to try it, but I just had to do something. And then Barton's men captured me and brought me to the Bar B."

"More trouble!" shouted Slim, glancing ahead. "Here comes the sheriff and the posse. He's siding with Barton because of the cattle rustling stuff."

The sheriff and the posse rode up. Slim halted the wagon. The old lawman drew closer, a frown on his leathery face. He looked closely at the wagon and at the two horses with the Bar B brand plainly showing.

"Stealing Barton's hosses and wagons now, are yuh?" he said. "What's the idea?"

"I'll tell you, Sheriff," said Jill quickly. "And then you decide whether we are doing the right thing."

SHERIFF WATSON listened as the girl talked swiftly, telling him everything that had happened at the Flying M from the time Barton and his men had first started their attack on the spread. By the time she had finished the old lawman was frowning thoughtfully. The posse openly appeared anxious to side with the Flying M outfit.

"Food, eh," said Watson, staring at the supplies in the wagon. "I'll just make shore of that." He dismounted and searched through everything. "What's this?" he asked, looking at a

big wooden box. He frowned. "It says potatoes on it."

He lifted the cover of the box and then uttered a shout. The box was filled with money, and some of it was done up in money bags with the Second National Bank printed on them.

"The money that was stolen from the Limited!" exclaimed Sheriff Watson. "This is it— Yuh say yuh found it at Les Barton's place?"

"We shore did," said Buck Marsh quickly. "We just thought it was a box of potatoes. Didn't stop to think that potatoes usually come in sacks."

"Get ready, men," said the sheriff grimly. "Here comes Barton and some of his gunnies now. Make out like we're holding these Flying M people for them, and then draw down on them when they get close enough."

BARTON and his men swept closer. There was an evil grin on the face of the owner of the Bar B.

"See yuh got them, Sheriff," he said, as he halted his mount. "They're not only rustlers, but they been stealing food from my ranch."

"The girl tells me that yuh been raiding the Flying M for the past ten days," the sheriff said. "That they all been there fighting against yore men since then. That right, Barton?"

"Shore is," said Les Barton, nodding. "Been fighting them for ten days exactly."

"Then they couldn't possibly have held up and robbed the Limited just a week ago," said the sheriff. Suddenly his gun and those of the posse were out and covering the Bar B men. "I'm arresting you all for the train robbery!"

The Bar B men made the foolish mistake of trying to go for their guns when they learned they were found out, and they went down beneath a withering blast of gunfire from the sheriff and the posse. When it was all over there were only one or two of them left alive. Les Barton was among the deceased.

"There's still a few of them jaspers hanging around our spread," said Marsh. "Mebbe yuh better clean them up, too, while you're at it, Sheriff."

"We ain't got time to bother about that," said Slim. "Come on, let's get these supplies to the ranch. I'm twice as hungry as I was a couple of hours ago."

Jill and Buck Marsh smiled at each other as the stout little waddy again urged the team into a gallop, and the wagon filled with food went rumbling on toward the Flying M. The seige was over. From now on there would be peace in Sage Valley.

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The whip-lash caught Mustang Wayne in the cheek

"Bub" Castleton Faces Heavy Odds When He Sides with Oppressed Ranchers Against a Tyrant, but His Guns Equalize Them!

CHAPTER I

Ruthless Guns

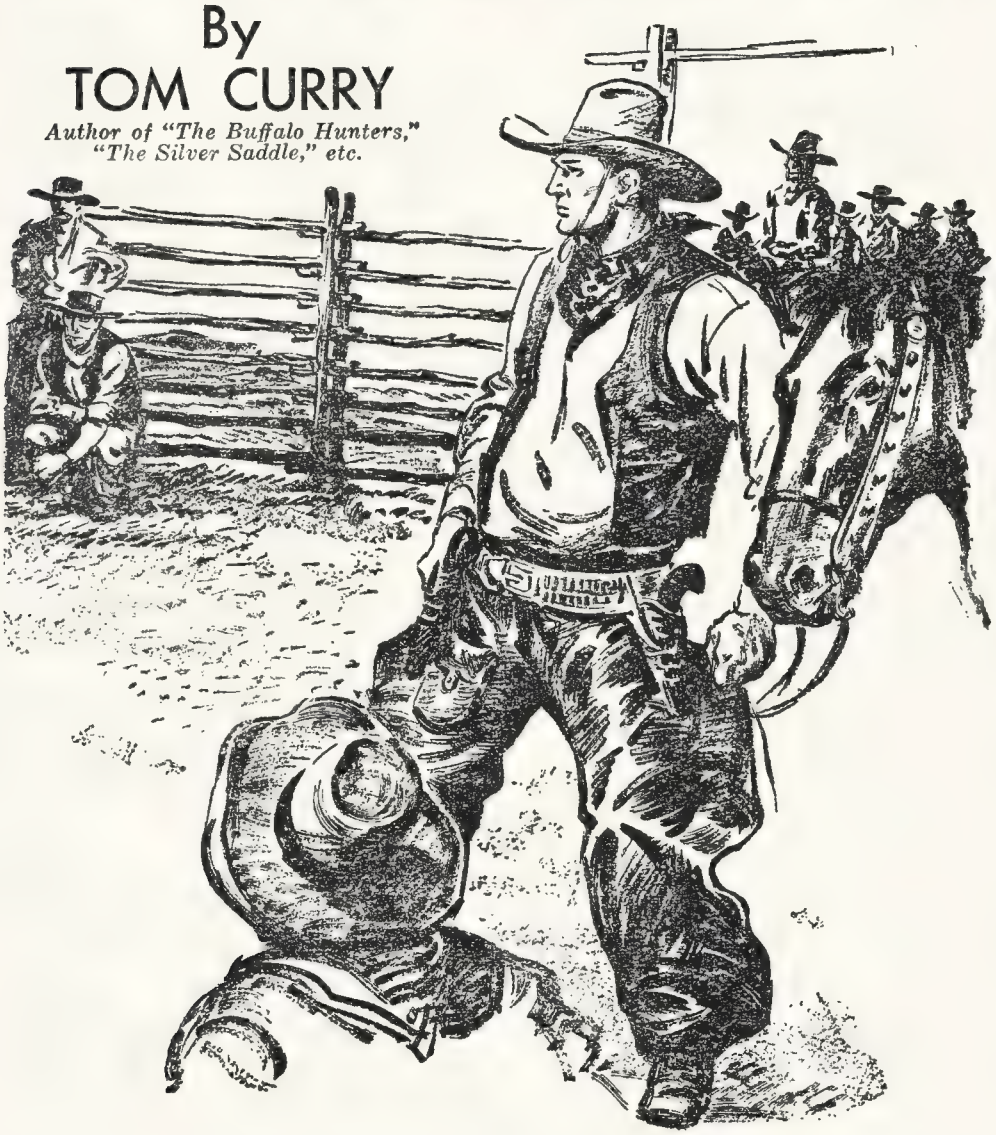
"BUB" CASTLETON grinned as he watched "Tough Morg" Fanton putting the business to the trio of Double W punchers they had come upon in the hot, aromatic afternoon. With wire-clippers in plain sight, they made no attempt to deny that they had been cutting the new wire which the great Triple Star outfit had been stringing through south Brewster County.

Castleton was in his early twenties, but he was a man, lean of body and with muscles of steel. Living on the Texas range, a boy grew into a man overnight. His gray eyes never changed expression as he sat his leather, watching the tense scene between Fanton, his boss, and the Double W waddies.

Young Castleton wore leather chaps,

OFFICE LOOT

By
TOM CURRY
Author of "The Buffalo Hunters," "The Silver Saddle," etc.



against the long-thorned chaparral, and a blue shirt. An expensive, heavy gun-belt, studded with diamond-shaped brass ornaments, supported his walnut-stocked six-shooters, the cartridges in their loops catching the brilliant sunlight with scintillating flashes. His black, fancy-heeled and spurred boots came up below his knee, though his chaps hid them to the ankle. A sage-colored Stetson shaded his gray eyes, and the light stubble of beard on his bronzed jaw was as tow-colored as his hair.

"What did I tell yuh, last time we met?" Morg Fanton was bellowing to

the miscreants, as a dozen of his other riders, heavily-armed, devil-may-care young punchers also lounged in their saddles and watched the fun as their boss gave it to the Double W. "I told yuh I'd use the Colt if yuh didn't leave my fences be."

The three cowboys, who rode mustangs branded with a W which had an extra line to it, shifted uncomfortably. They were outnumbered four to one, and Fanton was one tough range boss. Two of the Double W punchers were blue-eyed, light-haired young Texans. The third was older, a squat fellow with a crooked right eye caused by a poorly healed seam where a six-gun bullet had once creased him.

"Why, Fanton," he observed mildly, "don't yuh know yore new fence cuts our stock off from the main water supply we—"

MORG FANTON did not give "Shorty" Davis, as the man's name was, a chance to finish. His face turned redder than two beets and the crisp, closely clipped black mustache quivered over his gritted teeth.

"What do I care about yore water?" he roared. "Yuh think we can worry about every fool squatter in Texas? The Triple Star's a business proposition. It costs money to run wire, and I ought to rip yore damn hides off."

Shorty grinned wryly.

"Wait'll Mustang Wayne hears yuh call him a squatter, Fanton!" he challenged. "He's been in these parts forty years, long 'fore we seen yore stars."

Bub Castleton stiffened. That crack about stars wasn't so good. It would infuriate Fanton.

Tough Morg grew ominously quiet. His black eyes drilled Shorty Davis, then he said contemptuously:

"Get off yore hoss—pronto."

Fanton himself dismounted, his huge, hair-flecked hands on his wide hips. He was big all over, well over six feet, weighing two hundred and twenty pounds. His leathery skin was like a bull's hide. His riding clothes, though dusty, were expensive.

Shorty Davis refused the challenge to fight it out with fists. He knew that Morg Fanton could take him to pieces.

"That ain't my style, Fanton," he growled, but he was angry now. Red lights flicked in his eyes, as rage overcame caution.

Fanton's men just sat and watched. Their boss could take care of Shorty and two more like him. It had been exciting work, chasing off squatters and consolidating the far-flung range of the Triple Star spread, of which Morgan Fanton was part owner and complete boss. There had been some gun work and a lot of fist fighting. Morg Fanton's reputation as a rough-and-tumble scrapper, however, was beginning to have its effect. Men did not want to tangle with him.

Bub Castleton had been riding for the big spread, which hired a hundred punchers, for six months. Youthful enough to be a hero-worshiper, he was blindly devoted to Fanton. The spread paid its men on the dot, gave them good equipment and food, and the riders, in return, gave their boss their sheer loyalty. Bub Castleton himself had not been in on much of the rough work so far. An expert bronc buster and ace cowpuncher he had been kept pretty busy at the work he did so well. But he had built up an idea that Morg Fanton stood head and shoulders above all others in a country that was tough to begin with.

Fanton, with plain contempt for Shorty Davis, reached out and grabbed the squat Double W man by the belt, half yanking him from his seat. Shorty cursed, struck at Fanton's lips. A little blood spurted. With the bellow of an enraged bull, Fanton pulled Davis from the saddle, and flung him heavily to the ground.

Bub Castleton kept an eye on the other two Double W punchers. In case they went for their guns, the boss must be protected while he was busy.

Shorty Davis' breath was almost

jolted from him as he hit the sandy, cactus-covered soil. His hand collided with a prickly-pear and he was badly needled.

"Get up and fight like a man, yuh yeller skunk!" shouted Morg Fanton.

Davis was a Texan, and no range rider worthy of the name could take such insult. The squat man knew he had no chance at all against Morg Fanton, but he started to get up, his face sober, his crooked eye steady. Colonel Colt had invented a means for making unevenly matched men equal, and Shorty Davis came up on his knees and went for his gun.

SHORTY DAVIS was quick but Morg Fanton was faster. The squat puncher's belt had shifted when he fell and that cost him his life. His bullet drilled into the sand a foot in front of Fanton. All it did was stir up the dirt, but it gave Fanton an excuse for the killing.

Shorty's arm slowly dropped. He stayed on his knees for a couple of seconds while the echoes of the two guns were lost in the rolling range-land. Tiny smoke puffs rapidly dissipated in the warm wind.

The blue hole in Davis' forehead turned reddish as the blood began to come. Then the squat man silently fell over in a grotesque, pitiful, dead heap.

Only second-fractions had elapsed. Bub Castleton's ears still rang with the sharp explosions as he saw one of the Double W waddies start a hand to a Colt.

Castleton was as fast as Fanton. Daily practice and natural ability combined to make him dangerous with a pistol. His Colt roared from the hip. The Double W man yipped, his Colt leaving his hand and sailing in an arc to the ground. Then the man had to fight his horse with his left hand, for his right was numbed from the impact of Castleton's bullet.

The third Double W puncher knew it was useless. He chose the wiser course—just sat there and did nothing. It was twelve to one.

Morg Fanton blew the smoke out of his pistol barrel before letting it slide into its pleated black holster. His hard eyes fixed the pair of waddies.

"Yuh witnessed that yore pard drawed first, gents," he drawled. "Don't forget that when yuh tell yore story. Throw down yore clippers and get the hell outa here. Tell Mustang Wayne I give him one week from today to pull his freight offa my range."

"Why don't yuh tell him yoreself?" growled the waddy whose gun had been shot from his hand by Bub Castleton.

But he tossed down his wire-cutters as Fanton scowled. So did his silent mate. The two dismounted to hoist Shorty Davis' corpse over the back of his horse.

"That's a good idea," Fanton said coldly, as he climbed back on his milk-white stallion. "Mebbe I will."

The two punchers rode west with their dead comrade, and as they dropped beyond the rise, Morg Fanton turned to his men and grinned. His crisp black mustache, like a stiff brush, twitched as he made one of his favorite remarks:

"Well, boys, Colts don't care. They jest don't give a damn who wins. It was me or him."

"Yuh done a fast job, Boss," one man observed.

Bub Castleton said nothing. The look in Shorty Davis' eyes as the squat puncher had died had struck a chord in his youthful mind. He did not feel quite right. But he shook this twinge of conscience off as they rode on slowly along the fence line.

They had not gone more than a couple of miles when distant shouts from their rear caused them to stop and look back.

"Danged if it ain't more wire-cutters—Double W men at that!" growled Fanton. "They've met up with them two totin' Davis and they'll be bilin'."

The two men carrying Shorty Davis' body had met up with four more from the rival spread belonging to "Mustang" Wayne. Six of them now rode, yipping, guns in hand, toward the dozen Triple Star gunnies.

"Let 'em have it!" Fanton said grimly.

Bullets were whirling about the Triple Star men. They were coming at long range and the Double W men were firing from fast-moving broncs, so the aim was not too good. Some bullets kicked up dust, others clipped the leaves of tall mesquite bushes and cactus growths.

A volley from a dozen Colts roared back at the Double W. A man next to Bub Castleton swore hotly as a slug drove through his thigh and pinked his horse. Castleton felt the snapping breath of one that ventilated his Stetson.

He began shooting at the widening line of horsemen, led by a slim young fellow on a black horse.

"That's Johnny Wayne, Mustang's son!" exclaimed Fanton, his thick-lipped mouth hardening to a cruel line. "I'll soon put a stop to his ambitions!" He seized his Winchester rifle.

There was something debonair, recklessly brave in Johnny Wayne's bearing, the way he charged against superior forces, that touched a responsive note in Bub Castleton. He didn't know why he did it, but he pricked his tawny mustang with a spur on the offside, just as Tough Morg Fanton took careful aim and let go with his Winchester.

The tawny bronc jumped sideward, bumped against the white stallion's rump just at the instant Fanton made his shot.

"Damn yuh, keep that fool bronc off me!" Fanton snapped impatiently.

But he yelled with triumph as the slim Double W leader bent suddenly forward in his saddle, and the gun left his grip. Only a hand, quickly reached out by one of his mates, saved Johnny Wayne from falling off his horse, for he was no longer conscious.

The winging of their leader stopped the charge of the Double W men. They quickly withdrew, riding off toward the Double W ranchhouse, some miles northwest.

Morg Fanton was sore all the way through.

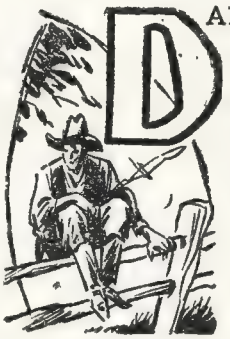
"Hey, Cassidy!" he called. "Ride back to the spread and tell Phil to send me fifty men pronto. I'm goin' to take care of Wayne today."

The Triple Star fighters dismounted, squatted around in a circle. Somebody started a fire and made coffee, while all rolled cigarettes. Fanton lounged off by himself, deep in thought, eyes lazily veiled.

Two hours later, when Cassidy came back, four dozen gunnies, armed with Colts and Winchesters, rode with him. Morg Fanton took the lead and the cavalcade started for the Double W.

CHAPTER II

Double W



DARKNESS was near as the men of the Triple Star sighted the low-flung buildings of the smaller Double W spread. They had passed cows in large numbers during their approach. There were horses here, too, bands of ranch stock, for Mustang Wayne lived up to his name and ran a lot of them.

But the Double W was no match for Fanton's outfit in a gun battle. They hired only a couple of dozen waddies.

The ranchhouse was built of adobe brick, whitewashed. It was one story, but rambled through several wings. White curtains at the windows caught Bub Castleton's eye. That meant women. There was a bunkhouse built of sun-dried pine timbers, hay barns, cribs, corrals a-plenty.

Men were on the long, shaded veranda. The sun was a ruby ball over the purple, distant Corazones Mountains as Morg Fanton led his bullies up to the house.

A big man, whose thick eyebrows, touched by frosty hairs, were drawn together in a scowl, came down the steps and stood out in advance of his men. Only about twenty men were waiting on the veranda for Fanton. Bub Castleton stared curiously at Mustang Wayne. So here was the owner of the spread which Fanton was at the moment swallowing.

Wayne was almost as big as the boss of the Triple Star. But he was twenty years older, with curly hair thin at the temples. He had the usual Texan light-blue eyes and a red, wrinkled hide. In cowboy clothes, guns on, he stood with long legs bowed to a horse's ribs from childhood.

Mustang Wayne was terribly angry, but he held himself in with a steel will. His eyes, clear as crystal, sought the hard-faced Fanton's eyes.

"Well, Fanton," he drawled, "what d'yuh want now? Yuh killed one of my best men this afternoon, and yuh wounded my son mighty bad. Mebbe yuh mean to draw on me. Is that it?"

Morg did not care for sarcasm. He came directly to his point.

"Wayne," he announced coldly, "I'll give yuh a week to pull yore freight. Yuh're on my range."

Mustang Wayne just looked at him. He was too crafty and old a campaigner to show his temper.

"Why, Fanton," he observed mildly, "I've been here since I was knee-high to a grasshopper. My father was the first rancher in Brewster County. Took up his sections here soon after the Civil War."

Morg Fanton laughed. "Yuh're still a squatter, Wayne. Land don't belong to a man these days unless it's fully deeded and duly registered and recorded in the county land office. Times've changed since the Civil War."

Bub Castleton silently watched the play. He sensed a certain superiority that Mustang Wayne had—maybe brains, maybe just years of experience—over Morg Fanton. And yet Fanton seemed sure of himself. It was growing more and more puzzling to Castleton.

"Well, I'd enjoy seein' yore deeds, if yuh have such," announced Fanton, slowly fixing himself a cigarette.

"I'd be glad to show 'em to yuh. Will yuh wait, or will yuh come inside."

"I'll wait right here. Make it quick, though. I'll be late gettin' home."

Mustang Wayne strode through his men and into the open door of his house. The opposing men eyed one another silently, appraisingly.

BUB CASTLETON thought again that Fanton didn't seem worried at all, and he wondered why. If Mustang Wayne had duly recorded deeds to his range, then Fanton was in the wrong, with nothing on his side except main force.

Mustang Wayne was gone for fifteen minutes.

When he finally came slowly forth, he said to Fanton:

"I can't find my deeds, Fanton. But I'll send a man to Alpine, the county seat, for duplicates."

Fanton was grinning behind his mustache. Bub Castleton had a sudden thought: "Why, Fanton knew Wayne wouldn't find his deeds!" The whole business was more of a puzzle than ever.

"Yuh still got a week in which to move out, Wayne, savvy?" Fanton said harshly. "I don't b'lieve yuh ever had any deeds, recorded or otherwise."

"Fanton," Wayne said slowly, "no one ever called me a liar and didn't pay for it. You will."

Fanton's men tensed. They saw the sudden tightening of their boss' hard face. Tough Morg suddenly flicked out his hand on which his stubby quirt hung. The whip-lash caught

Mustang Wayne in the cheek and left a livid streak.

"Damn him, that wasn't necessary!" Castleton muttered, edging in.

It looked like a fight—a bloody fight that would mean the death of many young fellows, reckless in their strength. But as Mustang Wayne stood there, frozen for an instant by the terrible insult, a slim figure came running from the house doorway, and flew down the steps to his side.

She leaped in front of Mustang Wayne, fearlessly facing Fanton, looking into his hard face with flashing brown eyes in which was a reddish glow of anger.

Bub Castleton's eyes widened. The girl was beautiful! Her thick chestnut curls were flying from the confinement of the blue ribbon band fastened around her head. She had a well-shaped nose and her mouth, despite the scarlet of full lips, was determined. Young and slim, there were still the curves of young womanhood in her figure, clothed in beflowered calico.

She was mad clear through as she began to tell off Fanton.

"I heard every word you said!" she cried angrily. "You coward! To hit my father. You wounded my brother this afternoon. And you're a thief, too! You're trying to steal our ranch! How did *you* know my father wouldn't be able to find the deeds to our property? That's what I'd like to know, Mr. Tough Morgan Fanton!" Her eyes defied him, as her fists clenched.

"Dawggone, she's smart, too," thought Castleton delightedly. "Fanton *did* know it."

"I don't want any truck with you, Miss Wayne," Fanton said.

He was not a woman fighter, hard as he was.

The sun dropped behind the mountains, and darkness came suddenly. A shaft of yellow light came from the doorway of the house, illuminating Fanton, on his white stallion, and to the girl standing by her father. The faces of the fighting men were pale ovals in the dusk.

"You get back inside, Betty," growled Mustang Wayne. He tried to shove her away but she would not go.

"Fanton needs to be told what he is!" she insisted. "He has no right to do what he's been doing lately—driving decent folks off this range and trying to take up the whole county!"

MORG FANTON tried to ignore Betty Wayne.

"Yuh got that week to get out, Wayne!" he broke in. "If the sheriff can't put yuh off, then I'll help him."

Fanton pivoted his white stallion, his face dark red at the tongue-lashing Betty Wayne had given him. "Come along, boys," he snarled. "We ain't wastin' time on these squatters."

The gunfighters behind Fanton slowly fell into riding groups. They started to ride off, with Fanton now at the rear of the gang.

As the Triple Star mustangs drew away, a single horseman did not move. He stood out against the house light.

"Hey, Castleton," Fanton called. "C'mon. You asleep?"

"No, I ain't asleep," Bub Castleton replied.

At something in his tone, the boss of the Triple Star cantered his stallion back to the young waddy.

"Didn't yuh hear me tell yuh to come on?" Fanton was a smart leader. He knew how to figure men.

The sharp note in his voice did not budge Castleton.

"I heard yuh," he said. "But I am still stayin'—that is, if Mr. Wayne'll let me. I figger he'll need as much help as he can get."

"Why, yuh damn young sidewinder!" snarled Fanton.

His narrowed eyes flicked from Castleton's set face to Betty Wayne. The girl was frowning a little as she peered through the gloom at Castleton's erect young figure.

"Take it easy, Morg," Castleton said carefully. "Yuh don't own me, yuh

know. In fact, I got two weeks wages due. Make yuh a present of it. *Adios.*"

"I see," Fanton said furiously, teeth gritted. "Yuh've fallen for Wayne's gal is that it. Yuh fool. Turn yore hoss and get ridin' 'fore I give yuh the quirt."

BUB CASTLETON had watched Fanton in his toughest moments. But there was also a steel streak in Castleton.

"Fanton" he said coldly, "if yuh don't watch yore tongue it'll get yuh killed one of these days."

"You threatenin' me?"

"Call it that if yuh like."

With a curse Fanton's hand moved. His quirt flicked at Castleton's face, but the waddy's swift arm stopped the worst of its sting. He got hold of it, and yanked so hard he tore the flesh of Fanton's wrist, where the rawhide thong held the quirt handle.

He did not miss the stabbing movement of Morg Fanton's right hand, either. Enraged beyond control, Fanton was going for his Colt.

The astounded Triple Star group had stopped a hundred yards away, and heard some of the hot argument. They knew that Castleton had decided to stay behind. But as usual the opening of any play was left to Fanton.

Fanton started fast, but Bub Castleton was ready for him. He yanked again on the quirt, so that Fanton was slewed around out of shooting position. His other hand was a blur as his Colt emerged from the supple holster and he rammed the weapon into Morg Fanton's mouth. The steel sight knocked out one of Fanton's teeth and smashed the flesh of his gum and palate.

"I'll blow yore tongue through yore brains, Morg," drawled Castleton, "if yuh don't behave. My Colt don't give any more of a damn than yores does who it plugs!"

Big Morg Fanton was shaking all over with rage. But Fanton was beaten. If he tried to use his gun now, he was dead. He put up both hands high, so that Castleton could see they were empty.

Dozens of sharp, metallic clicks sounded in the darkness—the cocking guns of the Double W fighting men as Fanton's gunnies surged back toward the ranch.

"Give the word to 'em to stand back, Fanton!" ordered Bub Castleton. "I'll pull this trigger if I do it dead!"

Morg Fanton knew when to back down. Castleton withdrew his Colt muzzle a few inches so Fanton could call out.

"Get back, damn you!" Fanton bellowed, spitting blood. "Well, Castleton, yuh traitor, yuh got me. What yuh mean to do next?"

"Yuh can ride, Morg. I ain't a murderer, in spite of yore teachin's."

Gingerly, hands in plain sight under the steady revolver of Bub Castleton, Morg Fanton turned the white stallion, and trotted out to his men.

Bub Castleton turned his own tawny horse toward Mustang Wayne. A bullet from the darkness into which Fanton had passed touched his shirt sleeve and plugged into the adobe wall beyond.

"Better get yore men out of sight, Mr. Wayne!" advised Castleton, keeping his horse shifting.

Quickly Mustang Wayne sang out orders. He shoved his daughter into the ranchhouse—and that seemed to be what Fanton wanted. A fusillade came from his riders, and shrill whoops split the air.

Mustang Wayne's men, from the cover of the porch, returned the lead. For a few minutes they exchanged bullets, but nobody received more than scratches. Bub Castleton kept out out sight until Morg Fanton ordered his men off. Quiet descended over the Double W, and the Triple Star bunch headed for home.

Mustang Wayne strolled over to where Castleton sat his horse. He looked up at the young man.

"I don't know what yore play is,

Castleton," he said, "but I shore enjoyed it. Will yuh come in for a bite?"

The tall waddy nodded.

"Don't care if I do," Castleton said easily.

He dismounted, took the saddle off the yellow range horse, and turned the beast into a nearby corral. Then, with stiff-legged cowpuncher's stride, spurs faintly jingling, he went into the ranchhouse.

CHAPTER III

The New Outfit

MUSTANG WAYNE came out of a side room, where his wounded son lay, having taken a nasty one through the shoulder that day at the hands of Morg Fanton. Bub Castleton, standing awkwardly close to the front of the large, roomy parlor, with its stone fireplace and the signs of a woman's hand all about, glimpsed Betty Wayne as she flitted from the kitchen to the long dining room table. He removed his Stetson and stooped to unfasten his silver spurs.

Mustang Wayne's thick, frosty brows were touching and he kept looking into Bub Castleton's eyes, as though trying to fathom what went on inside the younger man's head. That was hard to do, because Castleton had trained himself to show no emotion.

"Johnny, my son," Wayne growled, "says yuh was with Fanton this afternoon when Morg winged him."

"That's right," Castleton replied levelly.

He offered no explanation and Wayne hastened to add:

"My boys says yuh nudged Fanton's stallion jest as he shot. Mebbe if that hadn't happened, Johnny wouldn't have the chance he has of gettin' well."

Bub Castleton shrugged. He did not want praise or thanks. A man deserved no credit for doing what he thought was right.

The embarrassing silence was broken by Betty Wayne, calling them to supper. Castleton followed Mustang Wayne into the dining room, where the table was laden with food. The men, save for the foreman, ate in the bunkhouse kitchen. Betty sat down with Castleton, her father, and a couple of others.

The food was something extra and Bub Castleton was sure that was because Betty Wayne's touch had made it so. Now and then he would steal a glance at her. Once he caught her eyes on him and she dropped them, coloring a little.

Mustang Wayne did not ask any questions about Castleton's turning from an enemy into a friend. Wayne had had long experience handling men. Something had struck Bub Castleton. Maybe it was Betty, or maybe it was just general religion.

Back in the living room, Castleton rolled a cigarette. Mustang Wayne filled and lighted a pipe. Castleton took two or three long drags before he asked:

"What happened to the deeds?"

Mustang Wayne shrugged. "They ain't where I left 'em."

"And where was that?"

"I had 'em in my desk drawer, in a brown envelope. The envelope's still there, but it's empty."

"Huh?"

They smoked in silence for a time, then Castleton asked:

"Any idea who stole 'em?"

"Dawggone if I know. Unless it was that Mexican."

"Which Mexican?" Castleton inquired.

"Young corral boy, said his name was José. Wandered in half-starved one day and hung around for two or three weeks. I fed him and let him

help round the yard. One day he jest wandered off. Ain't seen him since."

"José's a right common name. This young Mex, though, had a knife scar on his left cheek, didn't he? Wore a purple-and-yeller sash he was too proud of to take off, too?"

"That's the one."

Thinking was getting a little easier for Bub Castleton now. He was beginning to like this line of thought.

"This José," he remarked, "was a right well educated lad. He went to a Texas school and could read better'n most. He worked for us—I mean, for Fanton. Then he was gone a month but he come back. However, he ain't at the Triple Star any longer. He had a lot of money for a Mex and rode off. They can't stand not to spend it when they got it. His cousin or uncle or somethin' is a friend of mine—Pancho Serrara, one of Fanton's wranglers, and as white a man as they come. He might know where José went to."

Both knew well enough now that José had been sent to steal Wayne's papers, and had been rewarded.

"In the mornin'," declared Mustang Wayne, "I'll ride to Alpine. They'll have my deeds recorded and I can get copies."

He offered a little of the Double W's side of the trouble then.

"Yuh know that fence Fanton strung blocked us off from our main water. It had to be cut. A lot of it was on my range. Fanton's been actin' mighty high-handed in the county, drivin' off folks that's been here a long time. I didn't think he'd have the nerve to start on me, though."

"That's what Fanton counted on—takin' yuh one at a time. He's a smart man and a tough one, too."

Betty came in, and silently took a chair. Whenever he looked up, Bub Castleton could see her profile and the stray curls over her temples. He hunted in vain for signs of the temper she had displayed against Morg Fanton.

"I don't understand women," he thought. "But this one's mighty pretty."

Bub Castleton spent the night in the Double W bunkhouse. After breakfast the next morning he met Mustang Wayne on his way to the corrals.

"If yuh're not against it, Wayne," he said, "I'll ride up to Alpine with yuh."

Wayne agreed and Castleton saddled up his yellow steed while Wayne gave orders to his foreman. The men were to stay close to home and be on constant guard to protect his son and daughter.

The ride took them through rolling country, dry and covered with cactus growths, mesquite and the variety of strange plants for which the Big Bend country was famous. On bare ground lay what seemed to be old leather buttons—peyote plants, which when brewed made a stimulant for which white man and Indian would ride miles. There were waxy white blossoms, ocotillos with their scarlet flowers. Stock spread across the range, subsisting on the tough, dry but nutritious grasses.

Horses and riders were covered with dust, and the flanks of the animals were wet with foam when late in the afternoon they cut through the gap in the foothills of the Ord Mountains and saw Alpine nestling in its creek valley. The buildings of the town, erected around a central plaza, were adobe brick or wood, with false fronts. Sun awnings made it a typical Texas town.

The county records were at the City Hall, a long adobe building, one wing of which was the jail. The clerk was making ready to go home but obliged Wayne and brought out the records of county land transactions.

MUSTANG WAYNE laboriously went through the old pages of recordings.

"It ain't here," growled Mustang

Wayne. "Listen, hombre, what's wrong with yore books?"

The county clerk frowned. He swung the big ledger around and began hunting himself.

"Seems to me," Bub Castleton said softly, "that some of them pages have been cut out, Mr. Wayne."

The clerk pushed down pages, peering intently.

"Shore enough," he cried. "That fool musta mutilated this book, too!"

"Which fool's that?" asked Castleton.

"Why, the man that held this job 'fore I did. You ain't the first to find pages cut outa these ledgers. It's a crime—it's against the law! If they ever catch that sidewinder Ansel they ought to put him in prison." His walrus mustache twitched indignantly as he slammed shut the ledger.

"I know Charley Ansel," Wayne remarked. "Yuh know where he is now?"

"Nope," replied the clerk. "'Bout two months back, Ansel quit his job here and left town. They say he was ridin' for the Border. I s'pose he was mixed up in Old Man Hennessey's shootin'! . . . Say, if yuh'll fetch in yore deeds, Wayne, I'll be glad to record again for yuh."

"H'm," said Mustang Wayne. "Yeah, I reckon I would like to fetch 'em in."

"Wasn't Morg Fanton in town the day Hennessey was shot?" Castleton shot out.

"Yeah, I believe Fanton was."

Wayne wanted to go, but Bub Castleton thumbed through the records for awhile. "Look, Mr. Wayne," he said presently. "This here entry that claims a big tract for the Triple Star and Morg Fanton. Can yuh tell from the figgers where it'd be?"

Mustang Wayne could. "Why, damn him!" he said. "That takes in ev'rything I got and a lot more too, Bub." He drew in a deep breath of the hot Texas air. "I reckon I'm beginnin' to savvy jest how smart Morg Fanton is."

"S'pose we wet our whistles," suggested Castleton as they went outside.

After tending their horses they went to drink and eat. In reply to Castleton's questions, Mustang said:

"Oh, Charley Ansel's about forty, got red hair and freckles; he's sorta thin-like. I used to play poker some with him. He loves gamblin'. No doubt he sold out to Fanton."

"I remember Old Man Hennessey, too," drawled Bub Castleton. "A crazy old brush-popper Fanton found in his way. I recall how Hennessey patted his six-gun and says, 'Listen, Fanton, this here's my warranty'! . . . Say, Mr. Wayne, did you think Ansel was a killer?"

"Nope. What yuh drivin' at, Castleton?"

Bub Castleton shrugged. He finished his drink before answering.

"Hennessey wasn't the kind to let Fanton or anybody come it over him, Mr. Wayne. Here's my idea. Fanton was in town when Hennessey goes to the county office and gets shot. Ansel disappears. We got to find Ansel."

"If he's to be found. How about the Mex?"

"Yeah, I'd enjoy talkin' to José, but we need more'n him. Fanton would burn your deeds when he got 'em."

"Well, he'd burn them records, too."

"Yes, if he had 'em. That's why I've got an idea Ansel would make a powerful good witness."

"I got a mind to kick to the sheriff," declared Wayne.

"Won't do no good, less'n yore kick could be backed up. Though Ben Tilly's honest enough, I reckon. Might as well talk to him."

IT WAS growing dark as they headed to the sheriff's office. Ben Tilly, middle-aged, loose-jointed and slow of speech, sat with his feet up on the desk. A young deputy was playing solitaire in a corner.

"Howdy, Mustang," the sheriff drawled. "What's up?"

Ben Tilly heard the story. He shook his head, frowning.

"I'd like to help yuh, Wayne. There's been a lot of this sorta trouble in the county, but if yore land ain't recorded proper, why I don't know what to say."

Castleton realized that Tilly would wish to keep in the good graces of Morg Fanton, who controlled many votes. He had seen Sheriff Tilly putting squatters off the range the Triple Star claimed.

"Yuh gotta give proof," Tilly said. "It's Fanton's word against yores, Mustang."

Heavy steps sounded in the corridor. The door opened and two Triple Star men came in, their eyes on Mustang Wayne. They did not see Castleton leaning against the wall in the shadows.

"Fanton sent us in with this here note, Tilly," the taller, hard-faced puncher said.

"Evenin', Karnes — How're yuh, Sandy," Castleton said softly, and they jumped, swung to stare at their former riding mate.

"Well, I'll be—" snapped the tall Karnes. His hand twitched but he did not go for his gun. Instead he said to the sheriff, severely: "Look, Tilly, Fanton told me to report to you that Castleton here attacked him and stole one of our hosses. He's ridin' it now, I reckon."

Castleton's lips tightened in a grim smile. Sheriff Tilly shoved back his Stetson and scratched his short-clipped head.

"Is that right, Castleton?" he demanded.

"You know I was ridin' for Morg till last night, Tilly. I'll take the hoss back. They got a better one belongin' to me there—"

He stopped short, and swung to prevent Karnes from edging around to his flank.

"Lock him up!" Karnes said quickly. "We'll charge him!"

Karnes made a mistake then. He thought he could get his Colt on Castleton while Bub was talking. But when Castleton's blue-steel Colt came clear of its leather, Karnes' was still pointed downward. Castleton was cool as he covered the men in the office.

"Put up them guns!" blustered Tilly.

"Mebbe this *would* be better," drawled Castleton, as his left fist lashed out, taking Karnes on the chin and staggering him against the wall. "I'm on my way, Sheriff. See yuh later, Mr. Wayne."

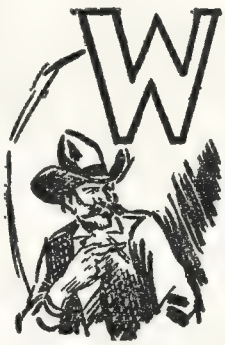
He backed from the office. He was not going to be locked up on Fanton's crazy charges.

As he hustled across the plaza, a bullet zipped up dust a yard from his foot, but he did not shoot back. No more shots came from the sheriff's office, but he heard loud voices as he went for his yellow horse.

Bub Castleton camped in the hills that night.

CHAPTER IV

Avalo



WATCHING the road next morning from a thick woods, Castleton saw Karnes and Sandy ride by. Half an hour later came Mustang Wayne. Castleton sang out and rode down to join him.

"Say, I even seen a lawyer," growled Wayne, mad clear through, "and he says I need proof to show in court. I got a mind to fight it out with a Colt, Bub."

"Fanton would like nothin' better," Bub Castleton assured. "And yuh'd be fightin' the sheriff and posse, too."

"Yuh're right, I guess. Figger that note from Fanton to the sheriff was for Tilly to toss me out legal next week. Anyhow, I held them two

skunks in the sheriff's office till yuh'd left town."

"Karnes will tell Fanton we were in town," Bub Castleton said, "and Fanton'll know we checked the land records. . . . Say, we got to find Charley Ansel!"

Late that afternoon when they reached a fork, Castleton pulled up the tired, mustard-colored cayuse.

"I'm leavin' yuh here, Mr. Wayne," he said.

"Oh, yeah?" said Mustang, thick brows knitting.

The south branch led straight to the Triple Star.

"Yuh'll hear from me when yuh hear from me." Bub Castleton did not go into details. Wayne either savvied, or he didn't. "Give my respects to Miss Betty, will yuh please? And if I were you I'd send a couple of men out to collect any of yore neighbors who've had trouble with Fanton—then the two Hennessey boys, whose dad died in the record office."

And without another word he spurred away south.

An hour later Bub Castleton pulled up, to get the lay of the land.

Ahead was the great Triple Star, a vast empire of the arid Southwest. There was a magnificent house which Morg Fanton had staffed by Mexicans. Trees had been planted, and through those live-oaks shone yellow lamplight from many windows—slitlike windows with bars, for this had been the *hacienda* of an immense Spanish grant. Bub knew the place back and forward—hay barns, feed bins, stables, corrals; the large bunkhouse with a special kitchen; windmills for raising water.

He dismounted and headed for the biggest of the stables on foot. Pancho Serrara, the wrangler, his Mex friend and one of the numerous relatives of José, was always fooling around the horses. Serrara loved working with the animals.

Castleton could hear a harmonica from the bunkhouse. In these the cowboys would be playing cards, jesting, reading or mending gear.

Bub Castleton slipped through the rear door of the stable without being observed. He sat down on a box in an empty stall and waited. After a while he heard a man whistling, and a lantern cast its moving beam through the front entry. Serrara came in, hung his light on a hook and started for a stall where valuable breeders were kept here when not at pasture.

Serrara's black hair was heavily tinged with gray. He had a brown skin, beady black eyes, and a greased mustache of which he was inordinately proud.

"Evenin', Pancho," drawled Castleton, getting up.

Serrara nearly jumped out of his hide.

"Madre de Dios!" he gasped, then his face contorted in nervous fear. "What you do, come here, Bub? You craze-ee loco, *si!* Ze boss he keel you. He say you horse t'ief!"

"When I'm ready to ride," said Castleton, "yuh can have the yaller hoss and give me my own."

"But why you come?" insisted the anxious Serrara.

"Got to find out somethin', Pancho. Yuh hear anything lately from that kid cousin or nephew, or somethin' of yores? José?"

Pancho Serrara frowned. *"Si,* José came here, las' night. He deedn't stay long. He say he was in Avalo. Eet's ovaire ze bordaire in Coahuila. José breeng lettaire to ze boss."

"Who sent it?"

Serrara shrugged. "Dunno. Ze boss he hav' sore mouth. He too seeck to ride today, but—" Pancho grew terribly agitated. "Pronto! Eet's Fanton!"

BUB CASTLETON swarmed up the rungs of the ladder into the loft. He could hear Morg Fanton's heavy voice, calling Pancho. The tramp of booted feet told him the boss was accompanied by a number of his

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men. Flat on his belly, Castleton peeked through a floor crack and saw Morg Fanton's swollen face, a souvenir of the Colt sight Castleton had rammed into his teeth. Fanton was in a bad humor and swearing.

"So there yuh are, Pancho, damn yore hide!" snarled Fanton. "Didn't yuh hear me call? Hustle now, fetch out Whitey and saddle him up. I'm ridin'."

Serrara jumped to obey. With the Mex out of hearing, Fanton said to the two men who had come into the barn with him:

"Remember, this is among us, boys. Let me start any play, though, savvy? I'll learn that red-haired polecat! But there's somethin' I want to know 'fore I begin on him."

"There's a rurale post in Avalo," said "Wolf" Roberts, a chunky devil with a flat-brimmed "Nebraska" hat on his bullet head.

"It ain't likely we'll be reckernized there. Besides, we won't do anything

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(Continued from Page 101)
in Mexico to draw the police. Wayne and that damn Castleton have been snoopin' in Alpine and I got to make shore I get hold of Ansel 'fore they do! Threatenin' to shake me down, is he? And to sell out to somebody else!"

As they rode away into the night, Bub Castleton was eager to get going himself. He had it figured out now. José had brought a note from Ansel asking for more money. Ansel was holed up in Avalo, Mexico, and Fanton meant to settle his hash.

"I got to beat Morg to Ansel, that's all," he thought tightly, as he came down the ladder.

Pancho brought him some food, which he ate as the wrangler rode off to fetch Castleton's own horse from the distant pasture. It took almost an hour for Pancho to catch Castleton's chestnut cayuse. The saddle was shifted from the yellow horse and Bub Castleton was ready to ride.

"Jest leave this bronc run loose, Pancho," he advised. "Yuh can say he wandered home."

"*Si, si.* Keep outa trouble, Bub."

Castleton thanked his friend, and hit the south trail for old Mexico.

He didn't dare hang on Fanton's trail too closely, so it was dawn when he crossed the Rio at the ford below where the river emerged from the great Santa Helena canyon, the cliffs of which were of bare, cracked malpais, volcanic lava.

As the sun rose higher, it beat down with fierce intensity. Far ahead he could see the faint, thick dust cloud rising where Morg Fanton led his men.

In the later afternoon Avalo town showed ahead in the creek valley, a motley collection of hovels built of adobe brick, thatched with thorned bush. Morg Fanton stopped his party in the chaparral outside the town, and Castleton lay back, waiting for sunset, as he knew the boss of the Triple Star was.

"A dozen of 'em," muttered Castleton, squatted in the thick mesquite. "I need help." He wondered where he might get it.

When darkness fell, cloaking the bush in dense shadows, he stealthily headed down into Avalo. Fanton was also on his way.

YELLOW lights guttered in the 'dobe shacks. The two *cantinas* were hung with bright lanterns. Mexicans in fancy bell-shaped pants and peaked sombreros walked the dirt street. Bub Castleton skirted the town, figuring that Fanton and his men would be on the watch for rurales before they kidnaped Ansel and left him dead in the bush.

He hid the chestnut mustang in Tin Can Alley, in the dark shadows cast by the police barracks, and set out to locate Morg Fanton. If anybody could find Charley Ansel, the boss of the Triple Star could do it.

From the dark passage between the barracks and a *cantina* he surveyed the main street but did not see Fanton or his horses. It took him fifteen minutes to locate the dozen cayuses, in charge of one of Morg's lieutenants up at the north end of the plaza.

Then he began his stalk of the small adobe hut, outside which Fanton's mounts shuffled their hoofs. Spurs off, Castleton reached the tiny window on the opposite side of the hut.

Morg Fanton's heavy voice filled the interior of the lighted hut. A scared-looking hombre with sparse red hair and freckled features, and wearing a Mexican outfit of purple velvet, with a red sash about his lean hips, sat in the only chair. He was gripping the arms so tightly his knuckles were white. His greenish eyes were wide as saucers.

"Yuh had yore chance, Ansel," Fanton was saying, his dark eyes glowing. "Yuh're comin' back to Texas where I can watch yuh."

Ansel seemed to divine, however, that Fanton had come to kill him.

"I—I won't do it again, Morg, so help me!" he promised. "I lost all the money yuh gave me gamblin'. I jest wanted a little stake to get away on—"

"Fetch out those record-book pages yuh was s'posed to burn up and didn't —pronto!"

Ansel opened his mouth like a fish hunting water.

"I—ain't got 'em here! Honest to Gawd, Morg—"

Fanton hit him in the face. Ansel gave a cry of terror.

"Gag him!" Fanton ordered quickly. He clapped a heavy hand over Ansel's lips.

Wolf Roberts pulled some lengths of rawhide from his pocket and began to tie Ansel's ankles and wrists. Then Castleton saw that another man was holding José, Serrara's cousin, in a corner.

Bub Castleton slid away. As soon as he was out of line of the horse guard, he raced for the rurale office. A dark-faced Mexican sergeant in his green uniform lounged at the desk up front.

"Look, Captain," Castleton said rapidly in Spanish, "some *gringos* are kidnappin' a couple of yore citizens. I know 'em! They're wanted by the Texas Rangers. They're grabbin' that redhead Ansel and young José."

The sergeant came to life with a snap. He called quick orders and a file of soldierlike peons hustled from the back room, buckling on gunbelts.

Castleton himself was already on his way back to Ansel's hut. He sneaked up on the horse guard who was now craning his neck to watch the rurales who were marching at double-quick up the main road.

Just as the sentry swung toward the hut to give the alarm, Castleton hit him. The vicious blow felled the man. The loose mustangs trotted off across the plaza. "What the hell's that?" Morg Fanton had heard the thudding hoofs. "Hey, Vinnie!"

"*Alto!*"

(Continued on Page 104)

"Haven't got what it takes? Who? ME?"

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(Continued from Page 103)

The rurales were up, rifles clicking to full cock. Fanton's men were drawing their pistols, but Fanton wanted no open battle with the police.

The sergeant, pistol up, jumped into the shack and saw Charley Ansel trussed and gagged. The captive youth, José, was whimpering.

"Put up yore guns, boys," commanded Morg. Plainly he was trying to figure out an alibi. "Sergeant, yuh've got us wrong. This man here's a criminal! We want him in Texas."

"Ees kidnap' jus' the same," growled the rurale leader. "You should come to me, senor. You are arres'."

The gag and bonds were taken off Ansel. Bub Castleton crouched under the back window, listening.

"Take 'em, Sergeant!" he heard the redhead cry. "They meant to kidnap and kill me!"

Ansel was mighty anxious to see Fanton locked up, to give him a chance to escape the wrath of the Triple Star boss.

When Charley Ansey came back from the police station twenty minutes later, with José sobbing in fright, tagging at his heels, the redhead began throwing belongings into a bag.

"Shut up, and get the hosses, boy!" he called to José. "We've got to ride!" Ansel was aware that once Morg Fanton identified himself and paid a fine, the rurales would release him.

As soon as José slid out the front door, Ansel jumped to a corner and began digging in the dirt floor with a butcher knife. He brought out a leather pouch packed with papers, which he placed in the bag.

Bub Castleton stepped through the rear door.

"Hello, Ansel," he drawled.

Ansel jumped a foot, facing around.

"Who the hell are you?" he gasped.

"Used to ride for Morg Fanton." Castleton saw the fresh terror in the greenish eyes. But not any longer. "I'm workin' for Mustang Wayne now. I'm the one who gave the rurales the tip that Fanton was meanin' to murder yuh."

Ansel bit his lip. "What yuh want?"

"Want yuh to come back to help us settle Fanton's hash."

"I don't want to go back to Texas!"

"Now look," Castleton argued, "you won't be safe from Fanton nowhere yuh go. He'll hunt yuh down. He'll hafta, to protect hisself. I guarantee yuh won't be hurt if yuh come back to Texas with me. C'mon, I'll carry yore bag for yuh."

Castleton scooped up Ansel's bag which held the record-book pages Ansel had cut out and kept.

José was coming with two saddled horses. He stopped short with fear when he saw Castleton.

"Hello, José," Bub Castleton said quickly. "Your uncle Pancho said yuh was to come with me." He fixed Ansel with stern eyes. "Hustle, Ansel! Fanton may get loose any minute."

Ansel appraised Bub Castleton, the six-guns and the lean, fighting figure, the determined face. "All right, I'll go with yuh," he muttered.

Castleton's saddled chestnut was not far away. The three mounted, swung out, circled the town and started back on the trail to the ford across the Rio Grande.

CHAPTER V

Range Battle

AT THE first gray streak of dawn, Castleton turned off the trail and led his companions into dense chaparral to camp during the day. He would take no chances of Fanton catching up with them. When they were inside the thorny walls, he carefully closed the gap and brushed out tracks for a short distance to hide the turn-off.

He tied Ansel's bag by a thong to one wrist and the horse reins to the other. "Keep quiet and sleep," he ordered Ansel and José. "Fanton's liable to come along any time."

He slept like a log until suddenly he awoke with a start. The sun beat down, making an oven of the dense brush. The sound of riders came dimly from the trail below. Morg Fanton was on his way back to Texas. The cavalcade swiftly passed, and swung north for the ford across the Rio.

Castleton went back to sleep. Toward sunset he woke again, fully refreshed. He had water and strips of beef, hard bread for himself and the other two to chew on.

They rode all through the night, crossing the Border and heading for the Double W. So far as he knew, Morg Fanton was not aware that Bub Castleton had been anywhere near Avalo—unless the rurale sergeant had managed to describe him. But they reached the Double W without encountering anyone. Mustang Wayne greeted them with open arms.

After a good sleep, Bub Castleton made his way to the kitchen next day, where he sat down, watching Betty Wayne as she worked. Betty's pretty face was flushed a little, for without a word being spoken she knew how Castleton felt about her. She gave him a pleased smile as every once in awhile she glanced at him.

"Yes," he said, "yes'm, this is the niecest spread I ever rode for." His eyes told her that was because she was around.

"I'm glad you like it," she murmured. "I try to see the men get good food."

Castleton shook his head. "Shore, it's good food, but—"

A shrill whistle brought him to his feet. Through a window he saw a long line of dust to the southeast. A Double W rider, a scout sent out by

(Continued on Page 106)

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(Continued from Page 105)

Mustang Wayne, was riding hell-for-leather back to the ranch, whistling a warning.

"You stay well inside, Miss Betty," warned Castleton, as he quickly checked his six-shooters.

Mustang Wayne emerged from a barn, running for the bunkhouse. Men were pouring from it, armed with rifles and shotguns. They could muster about fifty now, for Wayne had taken Bub Castleton's advice and got together some of the folks already dispossessed by Morg Fanton.

Castleton hurried outside and helped Wayne take charge. "Get yoreselves well hid, boys!" he ordered.

Ansel and José were in the house, where a cowboy was watching them.

Morg Fanton, coming up with his men, rode slowly around the corrals, at Sheriff Ben Tilly's side. He had about seventy fighting men behind him, and Tilly had a dozen deputies.

Mustang Wayne went out on the front porch, with the grave-faced Bub Castleton at his side.

Ben Tilly trotted his horse out ahead of Morg Fanton, who sat his horse, staring at Castleton and Wayne.

"Now looka here, Wayne," the sheriff said importantly, "I got to do my duty. Accordin' to legal records, this range yuh're on belongs to the Triple Star. Fanton give yuh notice to move last week. I hate to do it, but I got to foller the law. Yuh should've made certain yore land sections was recorded proper."

"They were and are, Sheriff," said Wayne earnestly. "If yuh'll step inside, I'll show yuh."

Morg Fanton scowled. "That's a bluff," he called. "Sheriff, throw these squatters off my land! Don't go in there alone."

"Yuh're welcome to come inside, too, Fanton," Wayne called.

Morg Fanton signaled a couple of his men and stalked with Tilly up on the front porch. Inside were several armed punchers, but Fanton followed

Tilly into the big living room, flanked by three of his own men.

Mustang Wayne reached in his pocket and drew forth some stained papers, the missing ledger sheets from the records at Alpine which Castleton had brought back from Mexico.

"See for yoreself, Tilly," he said, opening them out. "My land was recorded years ago, long 'fore Fanton begun stealin' the range from us."

"Them are forgeries!" Morg Fanton yelled.

Castleton crossed the room, opened a door. "C'mon, boys," he ordered.

Ansel, looking white around the gill and José emerged. At sight of them Fanton's face went dark-red.

"Here's Ansel, Tilly," Castleton said. "He'll tell yuh how, at Fanton's order and pay, he stole them records. José'll tell yuh that Morg bribed him to come here and swipe Wayne's deeds, which were burned." He spoke coolly, but he was watching Fanton every minute.

Ben Tilly scrutinized the papers and frowned at Charley Ansel.

"Is that right, Ansel?"

"Yes," Ansel said faintly, still deadly afraid of Fanton.

"That ain't all, either, Sheriff," Castleton said pleasantly. "Ansel, tell the sheriff who killed Old Man Hennessey when he come to yore office—"

Castleton suddenly went for his gun, half-crouching. Fanton's hand was flashing to his holstered Colts. Bub Castleton fired first but one of Fanton's men was in the direct path of the bullet. He reeled against Fanton as he went down, spoiling the aim of the Triple Star boss. The big fellow's Colt blared and Tilly got it in the thigh. With pain contorting his broad face, the sheriff went down on one knee.

Fanton threw himself backward, out of the door. Castleton's second shot hit him, but was not enough to stop him. The big man ran for his horse, shouting to his men.

(Continued on page 108)

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(Continued from Page 107)

Castleton could not get to the door in time to wing him, for Fanton's men who had been in the house were shoving out. But he saw the great army of fighting men who blindly followed Fanton's lead throwing up their guns, and fell back an instant-fraction ahead of their first volley. Bullets drilled into the house walls.

"Stop that!" roared Tilly, then was calling rapid orders to his deputies. "Boys, we're with Wayne now!"

They helped Tilly over to a window. The sheriff roared to the Triple Star gunnies to cease firing.

"Yuh're against the law, men," he shouted. "Fanton's a thief and a killer!"

"Give it to 'em, boys!" Fanton screeched, beside himself with rage.

Tilly ducked. Castleton and Wayne had their fighters coming into action now, the men who had been disposed about the house. Answering fire drove into the ranks of the Triple Star. Colts and Winchesters roared, punctuated by the *whooshing* reports of double-barreled shotguns.

Men outside were hit, and horses fell, screaming. Bub Castleton, six-gun working at one side of a front window, sought to get Morg Fanton, but the boss stayed back. Shouts and curses punctuated the banging of guns. For many men were in that battle who had good reason to hate Morg Fanton—men he had cheated and who now, through what Castleton had done, would regain their lands.

The hearts of the Triple Star fighters did not seem entirely in their work now. Some of them fought for Fanton with blind devotion, but there were others who had no desire to buck the law, fight the sheriff. Many of them either fired at random, or waited to see what would happen.

Fanton rode a wide circle, away from the front of the ranchhouse. From a side room, Bub Castleton saw the big boss disappear behind the stables and then emerge again. Fan-

ton was deserting his men! Keeping the buildings between himself and the men he was leaving.

Castleton raced for the back door. In the kitchen Betty Wayne tried to stop him.

"Don't go out, Bub!" she begged.

But Castleton was keyed up by the fight. There was that look around the mouth and nose, and his eyes were gleaming. He picked Betty up, kissed her lips, then set her down and he ran on out.

Tough Morg Fanton had disappeared over the crest of the rise. A few bullets came at Castleton as he made for the corral, but apparently the half-hearted Triple Star fighters did not want to hit him, though Colts continued to blaze as Fanton's lieutenants sought to rally the gunfighters.

Slapping leather on the fastest horse he could pick, Castleton hit the saddle. He spurred after Fanton. On the rise, he saw the fleeing Morg half a mile ahead. "Probably got a lot of cash hid at his place," he thought, "and he's goin' after it."

Fanton's horse had made the run over from the Triple Star and was not as fresh as the cayuse Bub Castleton had picked. Slowly the tall waddy picked up distance on the boss of the Triple Star, wanted now for murder.

Fanton looked back over his shoulders, as they came within revolver range. Fanton tried a shot at Bub Castleton, but the bullet only spurted up dust in front of Castleton's galloping horse. Then as Castleton took aim and fired, Fanton swung to shoot twice. Fair aim from the back of a swift-moving mustang was difficult. But as Castleton emptied one gun and shifted to a second one he put all his energies into riding, bent low over his horse.

Suddenly the rangy racer under him faltered. Castleton got his feet free and landed, running. The horse had taken one of Fanton's bullets, and

(Continued on Page 110)

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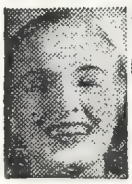

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(Continued from Page 109)

Castleton caught the flash of triumph in the big fellow's eyes.

Bub Castleton went down on one knee for steady aim. He was not seventy yards from Fanton, and did not dare miss. He felt the kiss of Fanton's bullet rip a furrow in his tanned cheek and nick his ear. Steeling his nerves he made his final shot at Fanton.

Morg Fanton suddenly threw up both arms and slumped in his saddle. The horse kept running, but the Triple Star boss slid off, bounced on the dirt, and lay still.

Bub Castleton ran to him, gun ready. But Fanton was gone. Castleton's final slug had hit him in the heart.

Castleton stared into the dead face.

"You taught me to be tough, Morg," he growled.

He caught Fanton's horse and rode back for the Double W.

The shooting had stopped. Shamefaced cowboys of the Triple Star were bunched together. Those who did not wish to face the law had ridden off for Mexico.

Betty Wayne came running out as Bub Castleton trotted Morg Fanton's horse up.

Tears were in her eyes and her face was flushed as Castleton dismounted.

Castleton's heart contracted as he saw her angry face. When she stamped her foot he gulped and was ready to run for it.

"How dare you!" she challenged.

"I—I jest couldn't help it, ma'am," he confessed unhappily. "Yuh looked so pretty that any man who didn't kiss yuh would've been loco."

"I don't mean that! You know I don't. I mean how dare you ride after Fanton in that stupid, crazy way. When I saw you coming back on Fanton's horse, I thought—"

"I ain't hurt much," Castleton muttered.

He turned his wounded cheek for

her to see. He wanted her anger to change to pity. And it worked.

"You come on inside!" she commanded. "I've got to dress that."

Inside, she got busy. After a while he caught her soft hand and held it. And she only smiled when he reached up and kissed her again.

"But don't you ever do anything as foolish as that again," she warned.

"From now on," he drawled, "yuh're the boss."

THE HOME CORRAL

(Continued from page 10)

rettes and smoking and eating weed. She grows hops and puts plenty on her very fine beer, which is the only on-sale kick drink in British Columbia. Wines and liquors are bought at government liquor stores, where you need a permit to buy 'em. There are no saloons, consequently.

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You realize sometimes with a sort o' surprise that Canada is what they call a bi-lingual country. In some parts, French is the language. You'll observe that the paper money is printed in both English and French. Two corners says one, two or five dollars. On the other two corners it's *un, deux* and *cinc* dollars. The coins are stamped in English, except for the Latin wisecrack such as appears on most of our own.

Where the Mounties Ride

To the far north, beyond the provinces, are Northwest Territory and the Yukon. Here the Canadian mountie is the law. He's the cop o' the wide spaces all over, really. He wears the scarlet coat like you see in pictures of him and the knife-brimmed hat. They're a great tribe o' men, the Mounties, and deserve their fame.

How they keep so neat and trim, days away from barber shops and pants pressers, is one o' the mysteries o' life. They come tall and lean and good-looking and

(Continued on page 112)

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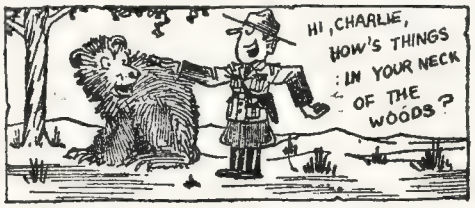
(Continued from page 111)

make it their business to know everybody and are respected by even the grizzly bears.

Wild Game Preserves

Back far in the Canadian wilds are National Parks that have no roads near 'em and are rarely visited by even a Mountie. You wonder about that till you find out that these primitive parks are



really nurseries for the wild game, sanctuaries from which they flow out into open hunting country.

In this way Canada hopes to make her wild game endure. Mountain goats and bighorn sheep take to the higher elevations, but caribou, elk and moose, also deer, are found down to tidewater. They say that more'n half North America's migratory waterfowl breed in northern British Columbia and Alberta.

There's glaciers and falls too numerous to list. Near Prince Rupert there's the highest falls on the continent, they tell you. It's 830 feet sheer drop, to say nothing of cascades below. Me, I didn't see that. There's no living man that's seen all western Canada. They claim there's parts that no man has ever seen.

Try to walk through some of the "bush" undergrowth and you understand why. No needle-carpeted aisles where you can

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NOTE: If yuh're headin' West, an' have questions for Old Doc Trail tuh answer, enclose letter with this coupon. 1-41

dream along, not there. Moss and lichen covers deadfall and boulders and treacherous crevices, so that you never know as you clamber over it where you might drop through and snap off a leg or two, or mebbe a neck.

Canoes and snowshoes will be the only means o' surface travel in such parts for all the years to be. Even before white men came, Indians occupied only little strips along their travel routes, mainly along rivers and lakes. In the solitude beyond, only the Great Spirit dwelled.

—OLD DOC TRAIL.

OUR NEXT ISSUE

Be ready for real Western thrills! The next issue of POPULAR WESTERN will be a humdinger from start to finish—featuring your favorite writers at their best!

The career of Buffalo Billy Bates will be continued in BUFFALO BILLY BATES MAKES MEDICINE, another exciting novelet by Scott Carleton that pounds with Indian-fighting action! To judge by your swell letters and postcards—keep them coming in—Buffalo Billy Bates is the most popular character introduced in western fiction during 1940! Glad you like him! In the next issue he smashes a deadly land-grabbing plot that will amaze you.

Sheriff Blue Steele and Deputy Shorty Watts will be here again, too—in PAINTED POST DEFENSE, one of the most thrilling novelets Tom Gunn has ever written. And—in GUNS RULE THE RANGE, by Philip Ketchum, you'll read a novelet of roaring justice that packs a mighty punch!

Swell yarns all—and there will be others just as good! So look forward to a swell issue—and meanwhile clip, sign and mail the coupon on page 112 and become a member of POPULAR WESTERN CLUB. No dues—no fees—and you're sure welcome! *Hola!*

—THE EDITOR.

ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS ON PAGE 49

1. Around the holdings of the famous cattle-king of New Mexico, John Chisum, who owned huge herds of longhorns. Hundreds of men were killed and the governor of the state was finally able to halt the bloodshed.

2. Jim Owens, noted old time cougar hunter of Kaibab Forest, Arizona, friend of Wyatt Earp, Bat Masterson, etc.

3. Stage-stands were stop-over places. Here fresh teams were held in readiness for a quick change and here the driver could escape from the attack of Indians. On the level roads through the lands of the friendly Pawnee Indians tribe these stands were fifteen miles apart. But, in the lands of the Arapahoes and the Cheyennes the stations were only ten miles apart.

4. Tecumseh. Indian spelling, Tecumtha.

5. The little single or double barreled derringer was a most popular "hide-out" gun. It could be carried anywhere—sometimes hidden under the hat. A "stand-off" weapon was the rifle used on the plains.

6. A riderless pony once carried the mail through after the rider had been killed by redskins. The pony, continuing on his run, succeeded in carrying the mail to the scheduled station.

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29x4.75-20	2.50	1.25
29x5.00-19	2.85	1.25
30x5.00-20	2.85	1.25
5.25-17	2.90	1.35
28x5.25-18	2.90	1.35
29x5.25-19	2.95	1.35
30x5.25-20	2.95	1.35
31x5.25-21	3.25	1.35
6.50-17	3.35	1.40
28x5.50-18	3.35	1.40
29x5.50-19	3.35	1.45
6.00-17	3.40	1.40
30x6.00-18	3.40	1.40
31x6.00-19	3.40	1.45
32x6.00-20	3.45	1.55
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34x4	3.23	1.35
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Size	Tires	Tubes
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Size	Tires	Tubes
30x5	$4.25	$1.95
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Size	Tires	Tubes
34x7	$10.95	$4.65
38x7	10.95	4.65
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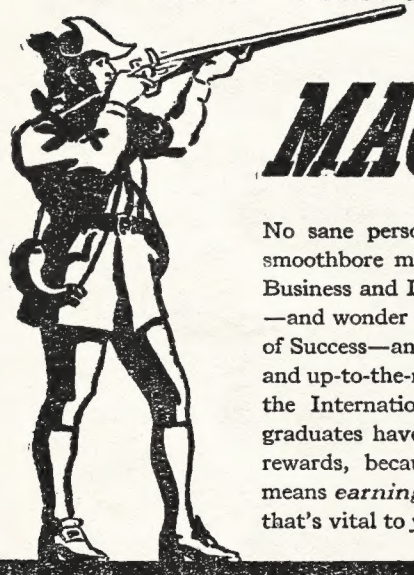

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